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by Eden

Charles & Nebie Godfrey

with the Author's
love.

April. 1903.

THE MAN-WITH-THE-WOODEN-FACE . .

THE MAN-WITH-THE-WOODEN-FACE . .

By MRS. FRED REYNOLDS

Author of "*Llanartro, a Welsh Idyll*," "*A Tangled Garden*," "*An Idyll of the Dawn*," "*In the Years that Came After*," "*The Hut on the Island*"

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TO THE

LITTLE TEACHER

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THE MAN-WITH-THE-WOODEN-FACE

CHAPTER I

THE LITTLE TEACHER

SHE was only a little music-teacher, not really old, but already somewhat worsted in the battle of life; having for years now—very long years they seemed to her—wrestled single-handed with the grim battalions of poverty. None but she knew how thin at times the line of defence had been, how at others ammunition had all but failed, or to how low an ebb now and again had the siege rations fallen. But in that camp surrender meant effacement under the feet of the cruel conqueror, and though, at times, the struggle seemed almost hopeless, the thin flag of respectability had never yet failed to flutter limply from the standard, and the gallant little defender still struggled on, working early and late, and taking scant rest at night.

She had not always been a music-teacher. There were dim far-off memories as of half-heard strains of music quite other than those of the "Solos for Juvenile Performers," and the "Infants' Pianoforte Bouquet" in which she sedulously instructed her pupils. These dim recollections showed, in an atmosphere of golden haze, a happy country home, a proud father, a dainty winsome mother.

The Little Teacher loved to watch those far-off joys dance like motes in the thin ray of sunshine which shot at times from the happy past athwart the dull grey present when she sat alone in her dingy lodging, her weary hands folded on her lap, her tired feet stretched out to her tiny fire; a fire which, squeezed to one side by the comfortless, coal-saving brick, had yet a part of its minimum of warmth absorbed by the wet and mud-stained boots, placed sole upwards on the fender to dry. Such frail cheap things those boots too often were for one who had to toil from house to house in all weathers and at all seasons of the year.

At such times the Little Teacher would have laid aside the neat serge she wore when giving her lessons. She had to be so pitifully careful, for had she not with her own hands to tidy her one room and cook her modest supper; so the neat serge would be hanging inside-out on its peg behind the door, and the Little Teacher would have donned her "play dress," as she laughingly dubbed the old Liberty tea-gown, a relic of far-off, happy days, and the winsome, blithe-hearted mother.

The Liberty gown was of faded green brocade, and hung in soft folds that were not unbecoming to the girlish figure surmounted by its small, well-poised head, around which the abundant brown hair was tightly braided. The face below the hair was clear complexioned, if somewhat pale. Long hours of toil and a diet of tea and bread with an occasional sausage or egg do not make for rosy cheeks, yet the pallor was not unhealthy, the somewhat thin lips were firm and red, despite the tired lines about them ; and though there were dark rings below the grey eyes, the eyes themselves, clear and steadfast, looked out in a trusting way from the almost childlike face. The face, as it were, of an overworked, lonely, yet not all unhappy child.

For nearly twenty years now the Little Teacher had struggled with batch after batch of juvenile performers. She only aspired to beginners. These, as time went on, had attained to more experienced tuition, abandoned music, or passed, some of them, to another wider world ; but in any case they had left the Little Teacher behind, stranded on the troublous rocks of childhood, and still herself at heart a child. For in all these years she had failed to become a woman. To her no lover had ever come. No lover in the flesh, that is. Perhaps amid the flickering of her tiny fire, sitting without further light to save lamp or candle, resting her tired limbs in the worn old rocking-chair, which she called her " only luxury," she would behold at times an airy lover descending from the realms of fancy, beautiful beyond the sons

of men, some son of the gods who, drawing nigh the earth-maiden, kissing the tired lines from the child-like mouth, the tears, perhaps, from the child-like eyes, and whispering of love and happiness, would make the tiny thread-bare room glow and expand until it were a temple of the gods, glorious with rich colours, filled with the rustle of angels' wings.

Who knows? Certainly at times the flickering firelight showed a smile on the patient lips, and at others the tired eyes closed and the Little Teacher slept. And the light would sink lower and the ugliness of the wall-paper and the cheapness and tawdriness of everything in the "furnished apartment" would be mercifully hidden whilst the last red glow of the fire would linger like a caress round the girlish figure, touching here and there the dim pattern of the faded Liberty green.

The sordid daily struggle would be laid aside, and there would be peace for awhile in the tiny chamber, till one of the boots would fall with a crash amongst the dying embers, and the Little Teacher would awake with a start and a shiver and creep away to bed; to gather, in spite of the unceasing rattle and turmoil of the London streets, such hard-earned sleep as might prepare her for another day of toil.

CHAPTER II

A NEAT TAILOR-MADE

THE days just before the Little Teacher began to teach—when she was between seventeen and eighteen years of age—were not among the golden memories courted by the firelight's fitful gleam. That was a period of blackness from which the steadfast grey eyes were resolutely turned away lest the courage of the brave heart should fail. A few short weeks had sufficed to rob her young life of sheltering home, mother, father, and all; the deepest blackness hung about the once-honoured father's name, dark hints there were, and vile whispers, which the girl in her sorrow was brave enough to set on one side. There were things she did not *want* to know.

Enough that she was alone and penniless. In her half-stupefied distress she sought the advice of her schoolmistress; she had not yet left school; for a few weeks at any rate she might claim food and shelter in the square, brick building, which had once, as compared with her own luxurious home, seemed so dull and cheerless, but which now stood

the one warm thing between her and the cold, outer world.

The mistress was very kind. Her heart, which had been kept pure and tender by long intercourse with the ever-young generation which passed through her hands, ached for the child—she was hardly more, with her sombre frock and rain-washed grey eyes.

"I wish I could keep you here, my dear," she said, and the wish was genuine; "but times are far from good, and we have one pupil-teacher already, and I have promised to take my sister's girl directly we have room." She sighed, and looked sadly out of the window.

After a minute she went on:

"You see, we never thought of fitting you for anything but just to take your place in society and be a comfort to your dear mother."

A little choking sound was the only answer.

"There are openings, of course, for women now," the mistress went on, and then glanced at the slight black form before her, with its childish, wild-rose face, and stopped. She was afraid—yes, inwardly, she was *afraid* the child was going to be beautiful. So much the worse for her. There was a dead silence; then the girl resolutely choked back her sobs.

"But I must do something," she said at last. There was a new note of energy in her voice, and abstractedly whilst waiting for a reply, her hand played a noiseless five-finger exercise on a neighbouring table.

The hand was white and slim, the fingers long, supple, and delicately moulded; they caught the mistress's eye, and in a moment, through the merest trifle, the fate of a lifetime was decided.

"Why not teach music?" inquired the older woman, as though suddenly inspired.

"But I—don't—like music," faltered the girl.

"All the better for you," returned the mistress, briskly. She felt a great sense of relief now this way out of the difficulty—*some one else's* difficulty—had occurred to her. "You have a correct ear and are a good timist, execution is of little consequence, for of course you will only take young pupils. Why, my dear, I myself have seen you helping some of the babies with their practice."

"Oh yes," said the girl; "but that was very easy, and because I was sorry for the little things."

The mother love, even at that time, was already awakening in her heart.

"But to teach——" she went on. "I should be so shy, and feel so strange. I might make mistakes."

"You shall remain on here one term and take the younger pupils regularly," said the mistress, impulsively. How generous an offer this was on her part only herself and the housekeeping book would ever know.

"Then," the good lady continued, "I will find you respectable lodgings and use my influence to obtain your first pupils."

"Thank you very much," dutifully replied the girl. Her life was being settled for her without her consent, almost without a protest—not quite.

She hesitated a moment.

"But ——" she stammered.

"What is it?" asked the other. She was kindness itself, but she *did* hope no insuperable barrier was to arise now when everything seemed so nicely settled.

"You'll think me silly——"

"I'm sure I shall not." The voice was very tender, for the grey eyes and red lips looked so pitifully young just then.

"Tell me——" she went on.

Then in a burst came the only poor little protest, the last, ineffectual, hopeless, she knew all along it was hopeless, effort to put this dreary fate from her.

"I shall be afraid," she said, with quivering lips, "to go about alone, and ride on omnibuses and things."

Was that all? The woman gave a sigh of relief, and yet she looked critically again at the girl; she was more afraid than ever that the tear-stained face before her would be more than pretty by-and-by. Nevertheless, she answered quietly, she really couldn't start the whole subject *de novo*.

"You will get used to it. Other girls have to."

Then she added these words of wisdom.

"Wear a neat tailor-made and a small hat, and

braid your hair close to your head, and you'll get through."

So the Little Teacher wore a neat tailor-made and a small hat, and braided her hair close to her head, and for nearly twenty years *had* got safely through.

CHAPTER III

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS

THE Little Teacher was not without certain small pleasures of her own, very simple and quite inexpensive ones though they were. The Free Library, for instance, from which she drew her only draughts of the sparkling life beyond the narrow one of dingy streets and dull schoolrooms which was all her own.

Then, too, her meagre days were not without their small excitements, for all her spare time and what was, if possible, even more a matter of consideration, all her spare pence, went in Guessing Competitions. Not that she worked upon any system, nor did she take in any single paper regularly; her plan was to visit the corner newsagents she passed on her homeward way on a Saturday evening, and, turning over the papers placed in orderly ranks on the counter, she would glance at the competition columns with their varied lures from an aluminium bicycle to a porridge saucepan, and would select one, or perhaps two, papers, and return with a beating heart and renewed hope to her dingy lodging.

Dull Saturday evenings and wet Sundays would fly like magic, and certain neat envelopes, with mystic letters at the left-hand top corner, would be hopefully confided to the post next day.

The brightness of hope was all the Little Teacher had so far reaped from her enterprise; for, although her name had more than once appeared in the list of "honourable mentions," some one else, well-to-do, no doubt, as she rather enviously thought, had always carried off the prize.

Still, she kept on.

Life would have been very savourless without that subtle abiding sense of bread cast upon the waters which might return after many days.

At last return it did and in full measure, and as the result of a competition, too, in which even her hopeful spirit had hardly dared to look for success.

One of the big London dailies had offered prizes for a list of the most popular Royal Academy pictures of the year. The Little Teacher had not even been to the Royal Academy; but the mother of one of her pupils, a Literary Lady of artistic turn, had lent her "Pictures of the Year," and one or two other illustrated papers bearing on the year's art had likewise fallen into her hands. People were invariably kind to the Little Teacher, with her gentle manners and tired childlike face.

At first she had made an experimental selection for her own amusement only, finally, habit asserted itself, and in a fit of "nothing venture nothing have," she had posted her list.

The unexpected happened.

With a sickly, swimming sensation the Little Teacher recognised her own name as one of the three amongst whom the first prize was to be divided.

Surely there was some mistake.

She turned the paper with trembling fingers to the light. There was her name in black and white, and the sum of money to which she was entitled.

The Little Teacher walked in a dream world all of gold for days afterwards. She felt as though the people she passed in the street or sat next to in the omnibuses must have heard of her good fortune and would wish her joy. Several people did indeed note the look of happiness which shone in the clear grey eyes and lit up the patient little face. The Literary Lady congratulated the Little Teacher most heartily.

"And what, may I ask, will you do with this sudden wealth?" she queried, half jestingly.

"Do with it?" The Little Teacher had not as yet considered that side of the question. The joy of success had so far been sufficient to fill her heart with warmth.

"Do with it?" she repeated, with a little laugh, she had something of a child's ringing laugh still. "I don't think I have thought about that yet."

"Why not take a holiday?" suggested the Literary Lady. So kind a soul had perhaps noted with sorrow that the delicate cheeks had grown paler

of late, and that where they once had been rounded was now a faint hollow, like the impress of a rough finger on a peach.

"A holiday!" gasped the Little Teacher. "I never have holidays!" adding, as the happy light died out of her face, "at least not for twenty years."

"All the more reason to have one now," insisted the Literary Lady, with cheerful firmness.

The more the Little Teacher thought of it, the more practicable, the more delightful, the idea became.

The worst season from a teacher's point of view was just approaching Her best pupils would soon all be packing up for the country, leaving behind a dull, dead period which a lower-priced class of lessons, music-copying, sometimes even envelope addressing, only just saved from becoming a time of starvation.

Why not then take a holiday?

Competitions were for a time abandoned, and the advertisement columns of the newspapers scanned instead. Hotels, hydros, apartments, places near and far, all displayed their printed advantages; but this was a great and important holiday, perhaps the only one in the Little Teacher's lifetime, and must not be decided in a hurry.

Amongst the advertisements one was constantly repeated which always caught the diligent grey eyes. There was an attractive sound about it to one who had never seen a mountain or a lake, and

who had almost forgotten what a woodland tree was like.

"Llanartro"—it ran—"is in the very heart of the Welsh mountains, and yet not far from the sea-coast. Lakes, rivers, wooded glens and the far-famed Shell Island combine to attract pleasure-seekers and lovers of beauty. Terms from £2. 2s. 0d. to £3 3s. 0d. a week. Board and lodging inclusive. Apply Mine Host, Pen-y-gwyn, Llanartro North Wales."

There seemed everything one could desire, she told herself. The Shell Island sounded romantic, and the wooded glens so cool and delicious. It was blazing hot July in the close, air-bereft, London streets. The Little Teacher went on to consider the cost. Three weeks at even the higher figure would still leave ample margin for railway fares and extras, and even a modest something to replenish her scanty wardrobe.

So a letter was addressed to Mine Host (the very name suggested a cheerful atmosphere and a land of plenty) engaging a room for three weeks in advance. No sooner was this letter posted than dull despair settled with dusky wing upon the Little Teacher's mind. She felt morbidly sure an answer would come saying that Mine Host regretted that all his rooms were already engaged. The advertisement had been displayed for weeks, and without a doubt he had been inundated with replies.

Yet when a day or two later an assurance came that Mine Host would be pleased etc., the Little

Teacher's feelings veered again. After all, was she wise to spend all that money at once? Would not such a holiday only unfit her for her work? Did she even want to go all alone amongst strangers? she had hardly thought of that point before. Would it not be possible to write cancelling the engagement?

But as the weary, gasping days lengthened out into one of the hottest summers London has ever known, when the sun-bonnetted cab horses were falling dead in the streets, when only melted butter was to be had, and even water was warm; then the Little Teacher found herself dwelling with great and even greater longing upon that vision her imagination had already created of the wood-embowered, mountain-embraced Welsh village. Finally she was counting the days to her departure as eagerly as any school-boy at the fag-end of the term.

Meanwhile, despite the heat and the daily dwindling round of lessons, the Little Teacher found time to renovate her tiny wardrobe.

At last all was ready, and it was with something of a child's pleasure she surveyed her little outfit, the crisp, inexpensive cotton shirts which with a clean "straw" and the neat tailor-made would suffice for daily need, and the dainty silk blouse and soft grey cashmere skirt which must "do" for evening wear.

The Little Teacher had tried on these last before her cracked looking-glass, and a sudden pity for herself had filled her grey eyes with tears. To think that this was the first time in all those years that she had had anything pretty to wear!

"And now I am no longer young," she thought, missing in the lighter attire the rose-bud colouring and healthy curve of cheek, and the brightness of the eyes that had looked out at her from her mirror twenty years before.

"I think the old Liberty green becomes me best," she said, with a quavering smile, "and I'll take the old thing with me for old sake's sake."

So the Liberty gown, relic of bygone days, which had shared so many lonely vigils and seen countless rosy visions fade into grey ashes, was not left behind when the Little Teacher took her first holiday.

CHAPTER IV

ENTER THE MAN-WITH-THE-WOODEN-FACE

A RADIANT evening with the sun already settling gently down in the rose-scattered west. Long shadows of wind-slanted trees, great purple hollows in the gold-touched mountains, the sweep and cry of birds sailing homeward across the marshes, and the air filled with the salt, strong smell and taste of the unseen sea.

Such was the Little Teacher's greeting to Llanartro.

Outside the small station was eager rivalry for the honour of conveying the weary traveller the mile and a half which yet lay between her and her journey's end.

This was finally settled by a man with a lame leg, who with gentle persistence 'drew the stranger to his vehicle, and ensconced her quietly within it.

"And your luggage, indeed," he inquired, mildly, "shall I get 'him' now, or another time."

The Little Teacher laughingly thought there was no time like the present, and whilst her self-constituted driver went leisurely in search of her modest trunk, she took in with keen pleasure the novelty of her surroundings.

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A couple of flannel-clad men were bargaining with another driver for the conveyance of their golf-clubs in an over-loaded waggonette, already crowned with an inverted mail-cart and a bicycle. A veteran fisherman, fresh and scaly from his sport, had quietly taken his place in close proximity to a handsomely dressed personage, obviously "just from town." In yet another vehicle luggage and passengers had actually overflowed, and one or two wriggling school-boys were endeavouring to hang on here and there as fancy dictated and prudence forbade.

Every one seemed in the best of spirits, laughing and chattering, only too glad to have reached their journey's end and to breathe the clean, sweet air after the dusty, smoky atmosphere of the railway carriages.

Standing somewhat apart from the noisy group was a tall strongly built man clad in grey tweed. The repose of his figure was in marked contrast to the general movement and bustle all round.

Now in her narrow life the Little Teacher knew few people by name, but, being of an observant nature, recognised so many by sight in her daily regular passings to and fro along the self-same streets, and was quick to note their prevailing characteristics, basing upon these subsequently names of her own finding.

So when the quiet figure in grey at last turned round showing a face as immovable apparently as his recent attitude, the thought went through the Little Teacher's mind like a flash: "What a wooden

face!" And so it was. Tanned by exposure to hotter suns than ours, clean-shaved, the somewhat high cheek bones, the grooved upper lip, the firmly modelled chin might well have been carved from wood. A not unhandsome, but, save for the dark eyes under overhanging brows, a singularly lifeless face.

A few minutes later the driver returned, chattering in voluble Welsh to the solitary porter who assisted him in the somewhat difficult task of balancing the luggage on the top of an already over-crowded pile of a miscellaneous character. This accomplished he climbed slowly to his seat, and was about to start when the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face (so Fate acting through the intelligence behind the observant grey eyes had already dubbed him) took a step forward and, with a courteous raising of his cap, quietly took the vacant place opposite the Little Teacher. So he came into her life.

CHAPTER V

"WE MUST BE FRIENDS"

AFTER a short drive along a level road bordered on either side by marshy meads, where softly quivering sedges and sentinel willow-herbs marked the secret water-courses, the little village of Llanarto came in sight, with its low, creeper-embowered Inn, its few bright-windowed, slate-doorstepped houses, and its few and simple shops. Past these the top-heavy conveyance took a sudden swinging lurch to the left, nearly precipitating the Little Teacher into the arms of the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face. He gravely assisted her into her seat, but made no remark. She blushed furiously, and became conscious that she felt shy and ill at ease.

The silence suddenly oppressed her, and yet what could she talk about to this inhuman person opposite? What indeed would she find to say to all those other people, vague, formless beings, as yet, whom she was about to meet? Perhaps her holiday was going to turn out a failure. Perhaps it would have been better never to have come. The child-like mouth drooped a little, and the grey eyes filled with tears.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face can hardly have noticed this; his companion was, of course, nothing to him but a quiet inoffensive little person of doubtful age, something of the governess type he would probably have classed her in his mind. Yet at the very moment when the tears threatened to brim over he bent forward, and for the first time opened his lips.

"Travelling is so tiring," he said, gravely. "Will you allow me to arrange things a little more comfortably for you?"

Without waiting for permission he stood up and wrestled so successfully with the varied accumulations that threatened to overflow and sweep both passengers into the road, that the Little Teacher was enabled to lean back in her seat, her right eye no longer going in momentary fear of the sharp spike projecting from a long parcel which suggested a bathing-tent or garden umbrella.

She thanked him with a smile.

Had fortune been kinder to her the smile of the Little Teacher would have been irresistible. As it was, it curved the red lips, and raised the delicate eyebrows and brightened the stilly depths of the grey eyes.

Perhaps the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face did not consider his companion so very uninteresting after all, for he smiled back, only, be it noted, with his eyes; the wooden mouth seemed quite incapable of the levity of a smile.

He made some commonplace remark about the

scenery, to which the Little Teacher responded with enthusiasm, for surely, in the whole world, thought she, there could be nothing more beautiful than the wooded crags that rose on either side of the winding up-hill road, or the peaty foam-streaked river that leaped among its mossy boulders below. And the scent of moss and pine and sun-ripened grass and far away honeysuckle was as new life to her nostrils.

The ice once broken the conversation flowed easily. The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face had a voice flexible, musical, out of all keeping with his immovable countenance. He, too, it seemed, was bound for Pen-y-gwyn, and had never been there before.

"So we must be friends," he added.

The Little Teacher was quite sorry when an ivy-hung bridge which spanned the meeting of two streams was crossed, a rustic wooden gateway passed, and the shaking conveyance ran more easily over the fine slate chippings of a winding drive under spreading trees with mossy fern-hung trunks and cloudy summer foliage, which lent a green duskiness to the air; until came a sudden clearing, and Pen-y-gwyn was reached at last.

The house itself was all that a Welsh country house should be. The slaty grey of its walls and roof half-hidden by fuchsias, many coloured hydrangeas, close-clinging Virginian creeper, and above and beyond all, roses in clusters pink and white rioting and clambering everywhere, peeping in at every window and almost hiding with their drooping sweetness the entrance door.

Just outside this same door, as the conveyance drew up with a lurch and a jerk, appeared several people. The Little Teacher looked expectantly for Mine Host, whom she had pictured with her vivid imagination as red-faced, portly, bubbling over with the milk of human kindness. This, surely, could not be he? This sallow, thread-paper individual with the obviously washed and shrunken flannel encasing, with scanty black hair streaked back from a pale receding forehead, and prominent yellow teeth showing between his colourless lips?

Alas for all illusions, Mine Host it proved to be.

Close beside him tripped his sister, all effusive welcome and arch gaiety, all flashing eyes and restless curls, for she wore her hair in ringlets of truest ebony, and shook them so, and made such play with her bright dark eyes that just at first the Little Teacher thought her quite young. Coming nearer, however, she noted the crow's-feet at the corner of the eyes, and hard lines where dimples had once, perhaps, adorned the rather fretful mouth.

Seeing these she passed an inward verdict that "Ringlets," as she had already dubbed the sister of Mine Host, might have been pretty twenty years before. Then, with a sudden sickly feeling, she added mentally, "She must be about my age."

But there she was wrong. Ringlets had left her youth considerably farther behind, besides, the Little Teacher had passed her quiet life in one simple, body-wearying, but not soul-killing, round of honest work, whereas the former—there is no knowing

where and how Ringlets had spent all her busy years!

Meanwhile, that arch little person had greeted her lady guest with kindliness, the masculine arrival with effusion. The Little Teacher glanced round to see what impression all this play of curls and feature might have made upon the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face. He remained passive, immovable.

After a time Ringlets lowered her colours as it were, her well-worn charms were evidently wasted on this tall stranger, though one might have expected him to be bored to death with that little white-faced person, who happened to arrive at the same time, and only too glad of something a little more lively. She turned and led the way into the house, and so lost the look, half-smiling, half-quizzical, which passed between dark eyes and grey as the new-comers followed up the smooth slate steps.

A brown-eyed girl with sweet, frank, English face, and a sketching block under her arm, was entering at the same moment.

Mine Host, with a preliminary long-drawn "Oh-h-h-h!" (a habit of his the Little Teacher found later) went through the necessary introductions. The Brown-eyed Girl bowed slightly to the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, and held out her hand to the Little Teacher.

"You must be tired after your long journey," she said, kindly, "and longing, I daresay, for a cup of tea."

She turned towards Ringlets, but that astute person

contrived to be deeply occupied with instructions anent the newly imported baggage to a stodgy Welsh lad, whose dull red visage surmounted a faded suit of "buttons" several sizes too small for him.

Mine Host stepped into the breach with a long-drawn "Oh-h-h-h!" and, "Dinner will be ready almost at once."

"It isn't for an hour yet," whispered the Brown-eyed Girl. "Tea is served for those who care to be in for it at half-past four, and there is no getting any at other times—that's the worst of this place."

"And the best?" smilingly asked the Little Teacher. She began to feel at ease with this pleasant girl, who was not so unlike some of her older pupils.

"Oh, the best," said the other, "is, without doubt, the scenery. No one who has once come to Llanartro will ever want to go anywhere else. You wait till to-morrow and see."

"And the people?" further queried the emboldened Little Teacher.

"Feeding-time approaches," laughingly returned the Brown-eyed Girl, "all the animals will be on view and you must judge for yourself."

She was just entering her own room, leaving the new-comer to follow the slowly retreating footsteps of Buttons and her departing luggage, when a thought evidently struck her.

"One word," she said in a lower tone, "if you want anything at table, remember Buttons is the people's friend, the Maiden the friend of the house." And with these words of wisdom she was gone.

The Little Teacher went with a light heart into the room indicated to her notice by the sudden descent of her frail possessions with a soul-stirring bang upon the floor.

Her spirits had risen wonderfully during the last half-hour. She had got to know two at least of her fellow-guests. The Brown-eyed Girl was a friend already, and the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face was not really formidable. Besides, he had a musical voice.

CHAPTER VI

THE PARSON, THE ARTIST, AND OTHERS

SEATED, an hour or so later, at the long dining-table, the Little Teacher was for the moment overwhelmed with a sudden shyness; but soon, finding no eyes seemed specially directed to her small person, and under cover of the clatter of knives and tongues, she began to pluck up courage and to look about her.

At her elbow stood a gaunt serving-maid of unprepossessing appearance, pepper and salt as to hair, vinegar as to expression, her plain white apron stuck out so uncompromisingly that it might have been cut from paper; her very cap asserted itself aggressively and seemed worn under protest.

This was evidently the Maiden of the Brown-eyed Girl's warning. The Little Teacher found herself taking vegetables in a hurried, nervous way as though she had no right to them. In complete contrast was the manner of the stodgy Buttons, who lingered at her side with a brimming sauce-boat, and seemed to invite a plenteous helping, even showing a decided inclination, the Little Teacher noted with dismay, to

empty the entire contents over her silken blouse. It was her only one, and her heart stood still for a moment; but, with a heavy snort from Buttons, the clattering crockery righted itself and went on its benevolent round.

The Maiden, meanwhile, having finished at express speed the circular tour with the vegetables, placed them on a side table and covered them up determinedly, as one who would remark, "There, so much at least is saved from the locusts."

On the Little Teacher's right was a tall, good-looking boy, not long out of his Etons, one would say, but with an evident consciousness of the soft down on his upper lip, and a perfect willingness to respond to the attentions of the Old Young Lady on his other side. The chair on the Little Teacher's left remained empty during the first course, indeed, she scarcely knew when it was filled, as her gaze had gone over the bent heads of her opposite neighbours to drink in the beauties of the evening as seen through the long low windows beyond.

Even in London, nightfall had always been her favourite time, and it was years and years since she had seen it in the country.

The sky was brooding, dreaming, flushing rosy red; the trees were massing, darkening for the coming peace of night; the birds were still fluting to one another, but in a lower quieter note. And all these people had their backs to the outlook and were chattering of towns and theatres and newspapers, and even things to eat!

The Little Teacher was recalled to her own neglected plate by a sense of movement on her left. The place was no longer vacant. She gave one shy glance at the occupant whose head was bent low as he eagerly devoured his belated soup.

He was in clerical attire, considerably the worse for age and grease. She looked again, drawn by a mingled sense of attraction and repulsion. The upper part of the face was full of intellectual power, but was marred by the hanging cheeks and loose-lipped, sensual mouth.

Though the Little Teacher had been too wrapped away in her quiet corner of life to understand the full significance of these, yet they gave her an ill-defined feeling of aversion.

She was sorry the Parson was to be her neighbour at table. If, now, the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face had been there she felt she could have talked to him; but he was far away at the other end of the table, and it was only once she caught sight of him at all, and that was when, calmly, imperturbably, he was holding the Maiden at bay whilst he deliberately toyed with the contents of the dish she was handing him, coolly selecting for himself the choicest of her cherished spoils.

The Brown-eyed Girl, looking charming in a dress of shimmering white, was seated nearly opposite, talking gaily to her neighbour, a fine healthy-looking young fellow, with crisp, sun-bleached hair.

Presently the Parson, having by dint of sheer energy overtaken the rest of the party in the meal,

allowed himself a moment's breathing-space, and evidently became conscious of the new-comer on his right.

He bent forward to Ringlets. She from her end of the table was carrying on a bantering conversation with her neighbour on the left, and at the same time directing with winks and nods, and sundry, silent movements of the lips, the straight-a-head steering of the Maiden, and the somewhat laboured and erratic course of the heavy Buttons in her wake.

At the Parson's whispered words she flashed her eyes at him and entangled him, as it were, in her ebony curls, then leaning towards the Little Teacher effected an introduction.

The first commonplaces over, the reverend gentleman, who somehow did not look at all reverend, began to talk. He talked so well that the Little Teacher felt quite sorry when a movement was made and she found that dinner was over and the ladies were already proceeding into the drawing-room.

Here lamps were lit and the Maiden was austerely bringing down the blinds with a crash, and drawing the curtains with a great rattle of rings and poles.

"What a pity!" exclaimed the Little Teacher half involuntarily, as the last glimpse of luminous sky and darkening land was replaced by green Venetian blinds.

"I am so glad you think so!" said a voice beside her, and a hand was linked in her arm.

It was the Brown-eyed Girl.

"It always aggravates me," she continued, "the

way they shut out the evening here—the very best of the day."

"Isn't that very typical, though, of people in general?" said the Little Teacher. She was roused and excited by the novelty of everything, and felt as though she had stepped straight into one of her favourite books, and was taking part in a conversation therein—a thing she had often done in fancy.

"They are always so eager," she went on, "to shut out the wide beauty of life with narrow commonplaces of their own making."

"It may be a question of short-sight," returned the other, raising a corner of the blind; "that far-reaching mellow duskiness is, perhaps, beyond their ken, whilst—" letting the blind fall back suddenly as she spoke—"a green Venetian blind is perfectly understandable of every one."

"But wouldn't it be possible to make them see? Ought we not at least to give them the chance of seeing?" asked the Little Teacher, her grey eyes warming. "Surely——" but here she paused suddenly. The gentlemen were already entering the room, it was not the custom at Pen-y-gwyn to long forsake the ladies, and the Little Teacher was conscious of a new presence at her side. It was the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, who in the severe black and white of evening dress looked if possible more wooden than ever. He had evidently overheard part of the recent conversation, for he remarked in feigned horror, "And make them discontented with that

paragon of respectability, the Venetian blind, for ever after!"

"And why not?" laughed the Brown-eyed Girl.

"For many reasons," he answered gravely, without a movement of his passive face, though there might be the ghost of a twinkle in his dark eyes.

"So many reasons," he continued, "that it would take too long to enumerate all. One or two will suffice no doubt to show the folly of the desperate course of action you two innocent creatures have unwittingly planned. You have only to imagine a world suddenly deprived of these," he lightly touched the ill-conditioned thing before them with his fingers, "to picture the disorganisation that would follow in hitherto highly respectable houses. No blinds down in the morning. No excuse for the lingering sleeper whom the garish light of day would tease with inquisitive touch into sulkily leaving the still enthralling couch; none of that free vent for the matutinal temper at present supplied by the impatient jerk which sends up one side of these scientifically constructed things about ten inches ahead of the other. Think, too, of the not infrequent excitement of the broken cord, when the charming arrangement depends fan-like from one top corner and presents an equally interesting appearance from within and from without. Gone for ever the lovely dust-traps, the cunningly devised museums of pressed spiders and flies. Nay, it must not be——!"

"It seems to me," broke in the Brown-eyed Girl, "that the Counsel for the Defence is speaking in

favour of the Prosecution. Late-rising, bad temper, broken cords, dust, spiders—surely, here is evidence enough to warrant a sentence of banishment."

"Hear, O Judge, one last word. Granting my client pleads guilty to all these charges brought against him so ably by the Junior Counsel for the Prosecution," here gravely indicating the merry Brown-eyed Girl, "yet still, I have one word in his favour. Does he not at least fill one useful position towards mankind in general in that he guards the privacy of our garishly illumined haunts that no outer eye may pry upon our careless hours of ease?"

"That might hold good in towns," objected the Junior Counsel, "but *here*, surely, there can be no eyes without."

"You forget," said the Little Teacher, herself and her shyness forgotten in the unaccustomed pleasure of living conversation,—"You forget, without are the silent, pure, and searching eyes of the night."

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face turned his dark eyes on the speaker. She was worth looking at just then. Her complexion showed pure and clear in the lamplight, her eyes glowed with excitement and intelligence. It is a pity, he thought, she braids that abundant hair so closely, and yet, on second thoughts, she was no doubt right to show the exceeding shapeliness of her well-poised head. He came to the conclusion his little tired companion of the afternoon was worth cultivating.

"After all, blinds or no blinds," he said, "the evening twilight is still there for those who *can* see,

for those who *will* enjoy it. Why should not some of us go outside?"

"Capital idea," broke in the fresh-looking young fellow the Little Teacher had noticed talking to the Brown-eyed Girl at dinner, and whom, a little later, she dubbed the Medical, by reason of his about-to-be profession, which he was rather given to talk in season and out of season.

He had been standing for a few moments an interested listener to the recent discussion, or perhaps only an interested looker-on as regards one member of the group.

"Capital idea," he repeated. "Will you come?" he asked in a lower tone of the Brown-eyed Girl.

"Half a moment," she answered, and crossed the room to a sweet-faced woman, who, in spite of her white hair, had quite an animated circle round the low chair in which she sat.

"That is her mother," the Medical explained to the Little Teacher.

Introductions were not insisted on at Pen-y-gwyn; though Ringlets, flitting in and out, generally contrived to rush old-comers up to new-comers and make them known to one another, sometimes at very inopportune moments.

"Yes, that's her mother," he went on, "jolly nice woman she is, no nonsense about her. She's the Artist's Wife, you know."

The Little Teacher did not need his directing nod to pick out the Artist for herself. No one could ignore for a moment that magnificent head with its

wavy iron-grey hair, its broad high forehead, short white beard and moustache and black overhanging eyebrows. She had glanced at their owner once or twice during dinner with a vague feeling of familiarity. Now the clue was given, she fitted the name with ease, and looked with even greater interest at the Artist where he sat playing chess with the Parson.

The two made an interesting study the Little Teacher thought, both men of intellect, but one of strong will, high thoughts, and clean earnest life; the other, equally gifted at the start perhaps, but one who had let the lower self get the mastery. And the result? That loose-lipped mouth and those shifty eyes.

The Brown-eyed Girl had apparently obtained the desired permission for an evening stroll. The Artist's Wife, though herself arrived at that age when sentiment gives way to thoughts of chill and consequent rheumatism, had evidently not so long left her own youth behind that she failed to enter into her daughter's romantic enjoyment of the twilight hour.

So a general movement was made of the younger members of the party. A slight delay in the hall whilst black-coated arms adjusted becoming wraps round silken shoulders, then all in a body moved down the low, broad steps and passed into the night.

CHAPTER VII

THE RISING OF THE MOON

ONCE outside on the broad terrace that ran in front of the house, the Little Teacher found herself walking beside the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face. Others of the party were chattering and laughing, but these two went quietly wrapped in silence. The deserted twilight had by now deepened into night. The distant hills loomed vast and velvety against the luminous sky, in which shone one quivering point of greenish fire.

"The evening star," said the Little Teacher below her breath. A moment later "Look!" she gasped. Over the landscape before them had come a sudden change. From above the hill, craggy and wooded that rose behind the house, the moon, herself unseen, was sending long silver rays; silently they stole, ever wider and brighter; one by one tree, rock and rippling stream were kissed into life, until the whole valley lay fair before them with a glint of silver on the winding river, and a filigree of interwoven shadows cast by gently moving trees on the dew-spangled grass at their feet.

The Little Teacher caught her breath.

"Have you ever seen anything half so lovely?" she asked, with almost a sob.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face had seen night fall on far-towering peaks, the moon rise amongst the eternal snows, had marked it drop resplendent into Tropic Seas, had watched all the pageantry of its glory among far Grecian Isles, had viewed the historic marbles of Athens reflected by its light in the calm Grecian seas. He had seen all this and more, but he looked into the quivering upturned face beside him, and he was not going to spoil the pleasure he saw there, perhaps, even, he envied a little so unspoiled an outlook on life. So he only said softly:

"It is very beautiful."

Then he asked:

"Is this your first holiday in this part of the world?"

The thoughts of the Little Teacher dropped suddenly from heaven to earth.

She gave a little sigh. How dull her companion must have found her silence.

"The very first," she answered, with a little laugh, "my very first holiday anywhere, at least since I was a child."

"Well, that cannot be so very long after all," said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face gallantly. At the moment he could say it with truth, for the shadow of the house lay all around them, and the pale diffused moonlight was very kind to the little face beside him.

"Indeed it is," said the Little Teacher, "so long ago that sometimes I doubt if ever I was a child or had a home and people of my own."

"Are you alone in the world?" he asked, softly.

The time and place were meet for confidence.

"I should say no one is more absolutely alone," was the reply.

"Well, there are worse things than loneliness," said he, after a short pause. "Yet it does not seem right for you to face the world alone, you seem too—" innocent, childlike, he would have said, but he changed the words to "young"—"too young."

"Ah, there you make a great mistake," laughed the Little Teacher, and her laugh was not a merry one. "I was young once, but it is long, long ago, before—anything happened," and she hung her head.

"By Jove," thought the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, "this grows interesting." He looked at the half-averted profile at his side more intently. "Now," he pondered to himself, "is she really—well—*oldish*, and is she playing at having a past for the sake of the reflected glamour of romance, or is she young in years, and has she really a past, and has that past aged her?"

But the shadows of the night hung about his companion's face, and he could find no answer to his question.

Meanwhile, the Little Teacher had no mind to let this real, live, interesting conversation flag for want of a little fanning on her part; so, with a vague

feeling of being part of a book, she turned the tables on her companion.

"Are you not also alone?" she asked.

The man's face looked more than ever wooden, for the moon was mounting higher and suddenly lit up its clean, hard lines.

"Are we not all alone?" he replied. "Some of us, indeed, mix with our fellow men more than others, bodily, that is, some there are bound hand and foot to fellow slaves whom they would fain curse and die; some again," and his voice grew soft and musical, "seem united by such a bond as would last beyond death itself. It is all seeming. In reality every man, every woman is born, lives, and dies as utterly alone as yonder star that has its fixed path amongst its fellow stars, sometimes near, sometimes far, but never meeting theirs. Even so are our mortal souls—there are times when we yearn towards one another, put feeble hands as it were across the abyss. Times when we believe the mists have parted, and that we and some other stand at last face to face, soul to soul. It is all seeming.

"You, yourself, in your own experience, have you not known such moments?" he went on; and now the moonlight fell on her face, and he watched it from the corner of his eye. "You have, perhaps, believed, trusted, told yourself some fellow-soul was bare before you even as your own. Then, suddenly, in a moment of stress, you risked your whole self upon that supposing, and, lo, the soul you had

trusted was a thing of your own imagination, and when you most needed it, behold it was not!"

He seemed to wait for a reply.

"No—" came slowly and gravely—"I can't say I have ever experienced that. I don't think I have had any time to think about other people's souls or my own either. I suppose it is very wrong of me."

"Good gracious! Does she think I am on the Methodist tack?" thought the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face with horror.

Her next words undeceived him.

"There have been times," she said, "when I have dreamed of a soul union such as you speak of; but it always seemed a thing very far off, for the poets and writers, perhaps, but not for poor little me." Her life seemed suddenly rather empty to herself, with all those forlorn years that should have been so full of life and were now all gone, "as a tale that is told," said she to herself, and then added rather pitifully, "only there has been no tale to tell."

At this moment, having turned at the far end of the walk, they both became aware that the rest of the party was already re-entering the house.

"I suppose we must follow," said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, and there seemed a note of regret in his voice.

"All we like sheep," began the Little Teacher, and then the inappropriateness of the remainder occurring to her she stopped short with a little laugh.

The Man liked that laugh.

"She is young after all," he thought; "then how about that past?"

But he *said*:

"I do not think we have gone far astray, at least not to-night," and he looked deep into her up-turned eyes. They were as the eyes of a little child. "I don't believe she has any past," he said to himself, with distinct regret.

They had reached the threshold by this time and were met by Mine Host, anxious to have the whole party inside before locking the door for the night. His long, lean figure stood dark against the yellow light within. As the last two stragglers came in silence, ringed about with moonlight, he only said, "Oh-h-h-h!" Yet the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face was filled with a most unreasonable desire to twist his scraggy neck on the spot.

But the Little Teacher passed in with the mellow lamplight glinting on her closely braided hair, and the mystery of the night still lingering in her eyes.

CHAPTER VIII

A DANGEROUS VOICE

THE drawing-room felt hot and oppressive after the cool night air. There was a babel of voices mingled with the crash of the concluding chords of a brilliant sonata in G. It was the Artist's Wife who rose from the piano. There was a sound of applause and a general demand for more.

"No," she said, lightly bowing her acknowledgments and folding together her pince-nez, "the old lady only plays to fill in during the absence of the younger people. Perhaps some of them have gathered fresh inspiration from the moonlight," and she turned her still pretty blue eyes in the direction of the latest comers.

The Little Teacher slipped hastily into a retired seat. She had indeed, with a pitiful little recollection of the evening-parties of her school-days, brought a few "pieces" at the bottom of her box; but there she had left them, and there she fully intended they should remain. She felt very small just now, and overcome by a great desire to hide behind some one or something.

Meanwhile, the other members of the party were dividing or grouping as inclination suggested or Fate determined.

"I hate music, don't you?" said the Brown-eyed Girl audaciously to the Medical.

"Of course I do," he responded unhesitatingly.

"I mean this sort of thing," she said, with lowered voice and a glance towards the piano where the Old-Young Lady was already settling her skirts and rattling her bracelets in a kind of preliminary canter.

"Yes, this sort of thing," returned the young man, only his glance refused to wander to the piano, resting instead on the fair girl beside him.

"Bid me dis-cour-se!" shrieked the Old-Young Lady.

"And that lovely quiet night outside," said the Brown-eyed Girl in a low tone, regretfully.

"Why not slip out again?" suggested the Medical eagerly.

The only answer the girl gave was to sink into a low seat by the window. There were a few books on a small table near. She took one at random.

"I want to show you something in this," she said. It was the "Biography of John Morgan," by Owen Evans!

The Medical sat down beside her, and they bent their heads over the book and seemed to find it very interesting.

Meanwhile the Little Teacher had somewhat recovered the sublime state of unconsciousness of self

in which, and the neat tailor-made, she had hitherto so safely slipped through life.

She began once more to look about her. She found herself bounded on one side by a sable rotundity marked by two long white lappets.

"The rear-guard of the Widow!" she thought. The Widow was deep in a confidential conversation with some other party unknown, and at present completely hidden by the aforesaid sable rotundity.

In the intervals of the agonised shrieking at the piano, the Little Teacher could only catch such stray fragments of conversation as, "and I'd a dinner-party that night."

"Of course you sent for the doctor."

"I did. And the first thing he said was——"

"Oh, bid me da-a-nce!" yelled the piano.

The conversation to the left lapsed into still lower tones, and the Little Teacher could distinguish no more; only she noted that the two white lappets seemed considerably agitated and from time to time showed unsuccessful attempts at standing erect with horror.

Watching them became at last so uncanny that the Little Teacher turned to the other side.

She had been vaguely conscious for some time of a monotonous sound, which she had finally disposed of in her own mind as the click, click, of knitting needles. She now found her surmise had been correct; for in a very upright, straight-backed chair sat a little whitey-brown person in a beige-coloured dress, knitting.

Her whitey-brown head was bent low over the work in which her whitey-brown fingers slipped to and fro.

When the Little Teacher spoke it was only some commonplace about a supposititious draught. A pair of whitey-brown eyes were raised for a minute with a deprecating "No, thank you," and the whitey-brown head once more displayed its very wide parting, and the busy needles clicked on as though it were of momentous import that the sad-coloured fragment depending from them should fill its finished destiny within the hour.

She was the sort of person always to be met with at places of the Pen-y-gwyn type. The one who has the draughty seat, is "odd-man-out" at croquet, one too many for a rubber; sits invariably back to the horses, and is missed at table by the waiting-maid with the asparagus.

"She seems even more lonely than I," thought the Little Teacher, and found herself wondering what the life story of the Whitey-Brown Person might be.

Just then with a final ear-piercing yell the Old-Young Lady abandoned the piano. The general conversation, no longer overpowered, broke out with renewed vigour.

To the Little Teacher the room seemed full of buzzing groups either sitting or standing, and all, it seemed, talking their very hardest. What could they all have to say? Was it really only last night that she sat in her far-away attic alone with her

rocking-chair and the old Liberty gown? For a moment a sense of regret overpowered her. It was so quiet in the dear old attic.

"I believe I am homesick!" she told herself. A minute later her thoughts were diverted by a fresh group round the piano, a group composed mainly of men, and having for its centre a striking-looking girl. She was unusually tall and unusually slender, which latter fact was accentuated by the clinging black gown she wore; a white muslin fichu threw into still greater relief the blue-black hair which was piled high on her small head; her complexion was dark with a tinge of colour on the slightly pronounced cheek-bones; her eyebrows were arched as though with a piquant suggestion of surprise; her eyes themselves glittered and shone as though some dark jewel were meshed in the lashes. She was not beautiful, the Little Teacher had declared to herself earlier on in the evening, and yet had found her eyes attracted to her again and again. Fascinating she evidently was, to judge by the little knot of men dissolving, renewing, altering, yet always having her for a centre.

"My niece is an incorrigible flirt," remarked the Widow in an audible undertone to her neighbour.

"That is plain to see," returned the other, rather as though it were a matter of congratulation.

"Is she going to sing?" she added.

"Only if some fellow will accompany her." There

was a fat chuckle, and the white lappets danced up and down.

"Some fellow" had evidently volunteered, for the handsome girl, having turned over some music with many appeals to her little court, much laughter and telling play with the glittering dark-lashed eyes, had at length selected a song and was humming it over softly to herself, whilst the would-be accompanist was settling the music-stool, running his fingers through his hair, turning down the lower right-hand corner of the score, and in fact comporting himself after the manner of accompanists in general, and the amateur accompanist in particular.

The prelude over the girl began to sing.

To a critical ear there was something lacking in her rendering of the song. Her voice, though not strong, was clear and well-trained, but it certainly lacked sweetness; there was no heart in it, concluded one at least of her listeners as the passionate words rang out unpassionately over the quiet room. Whatever the merits of the singer, her little public evidently considered her worth listening to; but then she looked so effective. Yes, that was the word the Little Teacher had been wanting. She stood there distinct in her sombre black, the lamplight warming the snowy fichu, and glimmering over her hair, bringing out colours in it like those of a rook's wing in the sunlight, her lips were parted in a half smile, her eyes glinted—she stood revealed: the Effective Girl!

The song concluded, there was a burst of applause.

"You must be very proud of her?" said the voice beyond the Widow.

"Well, I don't know," answered that worthy; "flirting's all very well, but it doesn't bring a husband."

"I suppose that's why you came here?"

"Well, one never knows. Girls must go about a bit to get a chance. I have one friend with four daughters, she used to be called the four-in-hand; but she went every season to Scarborough, and they are all settled now."

This gave the Little Teacher a new thought, and it was not a pleasant one. Was that the idea then hidden under all this seemingly careless enjoyment? It was a distasteful one, and she tried to put it from her.

She turned to the Whitey-Brown Person to find she had dropped a stitch. The Little Teacher offered to pick it up and succeeded in doing so. At this the Whitey-Brown Person became quite abjectly grateful. She was evidently unaccustomed to kindness, thought the Little Teacher with a pang of sympathy.

Looking up she caught sight of the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face. He had not joined the little court round the piano, where another song was already in progress, but was standing motionless, his arms folded, his gaunt figure looking somewhat like an ebony ruler set on end.

He was not, however, to remain long undisturbed in his solitary woodenness. The artful Ringlets in

search of fresh talent for the nightly concert had bethought her of the new-comers.

She skipped playfully up to the Little Teacher.

"Are *you* musical?" she queried in a gently insinuating voice.

"Oh, no, not at all," answered the Little Teacher, thinking with a shudder of the dreary monotony of five-finger exercises in wrapper-swathed drawing-rooms, amongst which most of her life had been passed.

Ringlets was easily satisfied. The query had evidently been a mere matter of politeness, and barren of expectation. A moment later she was putting the same question to the rigid ebony figure opposite.

After a few minutes' conversation this figure slowly became sufficiently animated to lazily leave the room, returning a little later with a roll of music. He stood for a moment in thought, and then crossed to the Little Teacher.

"Could you accompany me?" he asked in a low voice; "they want me to sing."

Now the Little Teacher was a quick reader and an excellent timist, and could, she knew, easily master an accompaniment of average difficulty at sight, but the man looked so excessively wooden at that moment that her heart failed her.

She pleaded fatigue. He moved on, and then she was sorry.

She felt still more so a few minutes later when, the Artist's Wife having smilingly taken the vacant place at the piano, the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face opened his passive mouth and began to sing.

The Little Teacher had never heard anything like it before.

The voice was rich, low, sweet, clear, sonorous, passionate all by turns or at the same time. It was only a simple ballad that he sang, yet it fell on the listeners' ears with a new, strange charm. And when this was followed by a passionate love-song with a dirge-like refrain, every voice, every movement had sunk into silence.

The song over people glanced involuntarily round to see if others had been as moved as they.

As for the Little Teacher, her bosom heaved, her cheeks flushed, her grey eyes grew moist until the last full note had trembled away into silence. In this stillness she heard the Widow whisper to her neighbour:

"A dangerous voice that for any girl to listen to."

There seemed rather an ominous sound in the words.

The Little Teacher shivered. She suddenly felt very tired, and was extremely glad to see a general break-up, which betokened a movement towards bed.

She wanted to be alone to think over the strange impressions of this wonderful new life into which she had so suddenly been launched by chance or fate.

CHAPTER IX

BOG-MYRTLE

HER own room reached, and the Liberty gown donned, the Little Teacher sought her mirror. There were two candles flickering in the soft night air from the open window; their light was kindly, and shone upon bright eyes and flushed cheeks above the faded green.

"Poor old gown," she said, softly, "you were young and beautiful once. I believe had my life been different I might have been pretty too, and to-night I do not feel so very old."

Her fingers trembled a little with still lingering excitement as she unbraided her abundant hair; it fell in a soft veil round the child-like face.

"I am not so very old," she repeated, softly.

The grey eyes shone back at her with a soft light she had never seen before. Something seemed to thrill through her.

"I am not old, but young, young," she asserted almost defiantly. Was the youth stolen from her by the pitiless past, indeed gone for ever? Had it not rather been waiting for her all these years? and was it hers at last?

With a sense of exultation the Little Teacher extinguished the candles, drew up the blind, and looked out into the night. All around lay the moonlight still and pale. From the river crept a mist, chill and white like a spectre.

The Little Teacher's exultation died.

"My day is over. The day I never had," she murmured, and shivered as she crept away to bed.

She was awakened early the next morning by the light pouring through the open window. For a moment she wondered at the feeling of quite unaccustomed happiness with which she greeted the new-born day. Then memory came back with gladness. The first day of her holiday and she really here, alive and well to enjoy it. She sprang out of bed, and went eagerly to the window.

The picture of last night was there, but how changed. A faint pink tinged the early sky, a gleam of gold played amongst the top-most branches of the trees, long blue shadows lay upon the dew-drenched pastures. The mist of last night was gone, and in its place every leaf, every blade of grass, was silvered with tiny drops. And even whilst she gazed spell-bound, she, whose morning vision for twenty years had been of countless chimney-pots, and on rare, happy occasions some two square inches of pale blue sky, even whilst she stood entranced, the sun itself uprose and kissed the dewdrops into a thousand glittering jewels.

It was not meet so glad an hour should be spent

within four walls. With light heart the Little Teacher made her simple toilet. She scarcely looked in the mirror; what mattered it whether she were old or young? The glamour of the morning was calling her, she found herself singing as her nimble fingers moved amongst her hair, singing—a song of twenty years before!

All seemed very still as she passed through the close gloom of the sleeping house and fumbled with the entrance door.

Breakfast at 8.30, said a framed placard in the hall. There were long glorious hours to be enjoyed before that time.

A cock crew as she crossed the threshold, to be answered by another farther off, and another and another amongst the distant hills. From the branch of a mountain ash, amongst whose half-ripened berries the starlings were already quarrelling, a robin sang his crisp little trill; he looked the picture of gladness with his bright beady eyes, his slender legs firmly planted, the orange-red of his breast quivering with his song; yet the sight of him brought tears to the Little Teacher's eyes. He was a Welsh robin and sang, doubtless, in his native tongue; but the sound, even more than the sight, recalled other very English robins unseen, unheard now for twenty years.

The morning was, however, altogether too gay for sadness; the robin had finished his song and was attending in a very practical manner to the wants of the inner man; the Little Teacher passed along

the drive, through the rustic gate, and was all alone in the glory of the morning.

She gazed about her.

There was choice of three ways, the one over the ivy-clad bridge and across the meeting-point of two babbling rivers was that by which she had arrived; the one to the right was tree-hung and shadowed; the third, through a field-gate opposite, fairly revelled in the sunshine.

Making choice of this last, the early wanderer passed through the gate. Its closing clang sounded loudly on the morning stillness. Some cottages were on the right, a few bright blossoms showed above the rough stone wall, and a thin column of smoke rose straight and blue from an ivy-clad chimney. No other sign of life was as yet evident. On the other side, beyond a tangle of blackberry in fruit and flower and great clumps of blossoming reeds murmured the river. The ground was heavily dew-drenched. The Little Teacher, long town immured, thought of her thin, cheap shoes, and wisely kept to the track. This led roughly upwards beneath some gnarled oaks, then past a building, half-chapel, half-barn, set mid a lonely little burying ground; then up and up, growing ever rougher and scattered with loose stones, amongst which the Little Teacher had hard work to keep her footing. At length it left trees and houses behind and stood revealed, a real mountain track, without wall or boundary, leading right away to the distant heights beyond.

Resting against a mossy rock the Little Teacher paused for physical and mental breathing space. She had read of mountains, thought of mountains, dreamed of mountains, but never had her rarest thoughts, her choicest dreams, revealed anything like the beauties here unrolled before her.

"Oh, if I could paint! If I could write!" thought she, as she drew in each subtle colour, each fall and play of golden sunshine dissolving into pearly shade. "I would take all this, the body of it, the soul of it, take it back with me to the dreary town that it might gladden the dwellers there."

The farther she went the more enraptured was she with her surroundings. Now a mass of purplish-pink heather came in view, cresting the wayside bank, and the Little Teacher must pull some for her waistband; then she must climb a craggy rock to obtain a view of the second of the two rivers, which sounded clearly beyond the marshy rock-strewn ground upon her right.

Now the road, grown somewhat smoother, led beneath the shelter of an avenue of pines, then, through another gate, past a small farm where pink pigs were already taking thought for what they should eat, and a sturdy Welsh maid, attired in short skirt and cotton bodice, and with her dark untidy locks surmounted by an old felt hat, was just releasing the sweet-smelling, satin-skinned black cows from the milking shed.

The Little Teacher stared open-eyed at this uncouth specimen of womanhood; and when the

broad mouth opened to give vent to a lusty "Borro-dach!" she fairly took to her heels and fled.

The next instant she had forgotten her late encounter in the glory of the prospect that burst into view.

An upland valley now was gained, where the river, not yet rock-thwarted, stole with a silver gleam between rush-bordered, flower-studded banks; on its surface the yellow water-lily shone; beyond the river were marshes; beyond the marshes heathery knolls; beyond and above these, sheer, precipitous, the rocky mountain side.

The Little Teacher had not yet gazed her fill when her attention was distracted by a new and subtly charming odour which greeted her nostrils. Looking round to find some blossom as its source, she discovered that it emanated from certain close-growing bushes that studded the spongy turf around her.

It was her first acquaintance with bog-myrtle. The scent of it would doubtless carry with it long after the glory of that August morning, the wild plunge into the unspoiled country, the first joyous burst of absolute freedom she had ever known.

"It is funny," she thought to herself, when at last she turned her back to the mountains and resolutely set her face towards Pen-y-gwyn, "it is funny to think some one else is cooking my breakfast and that I don't even know what it is. A kipper, very salt, perhaps, or a London egg. Bah! I don't think I can ever eat one again."

This thought sobered her.

"It will never do," she said severely to herself, "if this holiday is going to make you fanciful and unfit you for your daily life; for in all probability, as you know well, if this is your first so also is it your very last holiday."

Thus self-admonished her smile disappeared for a moment, only to return with a new brightness as a squirrel ran across her path to find refuge in one of the tall pine-trees which she had again reached on her homeward journey. A squirrel! Just like those in the books and really alive. She peered up into the misty network of branches; but no little red head and glint of white teeth rewarded her gaze.

"He is gone," she said, "and I must go too, however late I am I cannot be extravagant and hail a bus here." Again she laughed. Such little things pleased this child-like soul as she tripped gaily down hill. She had quite forgotten her thin London shoes by this time, in spite of the fact that both were considerably battered and scratched, and one was plastered with black peat slime, a memento of the spot where she had garnered the sheaf of bog-myrtle with which she had filled her arms. Her neat tailor-made, too, was decidedly wet about the hem, and adorned here and there with closely adhering burrs; one cuff of her daintily crisp cotton shirt was limp and wet; her straw hat had slipped sideways, and a strand or two of the closely braided hair had escaped control and actually had

the audacity to curl about her brow. Altogether she was conscious of presenting a terribly rollicking, devil-me-care appearance, greatly increased she considered by the grey, black-tipped wood-pigeon's feather she had found and stuck in her hatband.

"What on earth would my pupils' mothers think of me now?" she thought. As though in taking an early stroll with Mother Nature and getting, may be, a trifle less artificial by reason of her caresses, she had done something strangely bold, and had set all city dames and their fashion-plates at defiance!

CHAPTER X

THE BREAKFAST BELL

THOUGH the backward way lay down hill, the Little Teacher had lingered so long in the Happy Valley that even as she passed the lonely burial ground, her thin gold watch, once her mother's, told her that it was just upon the breakfast hour. So it was with quickened pace she passed the cottage of the ivy-clad chimney, where steps clattering on the slate paving, the rattle of pots and the gabble of Welsh tongues, announced the day's work already in full swing.

As the garden-gate fell to behind her, another sound broke on her ears, the clanging of a high-toned bell.

"The breakfast bell," she exclaimed, "and I in this condition!"

To add to her dismay, as she turned the corner she saw there was no chance of slipping in quietly; for the steps of the house were covered with people, talking and laughing, and all, it seemed to the bedraggled Little Teacher, in the pink of spotless perfection as regards their appearance.

There was the Brown-eyed Girl, fresh and dainty in pale pink blouse and soft grey skirt; the Widow rosy and shining, with new-crisped lappets stirring in the morning breeze; the Boy and the Medical laughing together in their snowy flannels and gay-hued blazers; and the Effective Girl, more effective than ever in close-fitting black serge, with square-cut linen collar and cuffs, and a great splash of scarlet geranium at her breast.

She was talking to the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face who, looking stiff and straight in spite of his well-cut grey flannels, had his back towards the Little Teacher. She, poor little soul, was pitifully conscious of her splashed and dishevelled appearance, and would, I verily believe, have there and then turned and fled had not a chorus of kindly greeting arrested her steps.

The Brown-eyed Girl left her father's side, she had been hanging on his arm as the Little Teacher had noted with a quiver of something like pain, and ran to meet the new-comer.

"You have stolen a march on us all," she cried, gaily, "and have not come back empty handed. May I take a tiny spray?" suiting the action to the word. "I never can resist bog-myrtle."

One and another gathered round with kindly interest, and the Little Teacher's pulse began to beat less furiously. No one seemed to notice her untidy condition. Only the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face stood without the circle, and beyond raising his speckled straw took no notice of his last night's companion.

At this moment, Mine Host, looking more yellow than ever in the morning light, his thin frame meagrely covered by shrunken clothing, his hands jingling the keys in his pockets, announced that breakfast was growing cold. There was a general movement up the broad steps.

The Effective Girl and the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face were a little behind the others. She was laughing up at him. His mouth was immovable, but his eyes were smiling.

The Little Teacher came last of all. It seemed to her the morning had lost something of its brightness.

Perhaps she was tired.

CHAPTER XI

"BONT-DDU TO-DAY, I THINK"

WHEN the Little Teacher slipped into the dining-room a few minutes later, empty porridge plates were already passing out; she found her own portion cooling at her place, and, with an eerie feeling of being suddenly transported back into her school-days, ate the thickening mass with conscientious completeness.

Meanwhile, she was not deaf to the clamour of tongues around her. Fragments of conversation greeted her ears.

"Bike into Barmouth and catch the motor-car for Bedd-gelert."

"I for one should never manage it."

"It's about two thousand feet high."

"Go in a waggonette——"

"——Up the Roman steps."

"Did you catch any fish yesterday?"

"Just about three hundred."

"Got tired of counting them."

"The echo is really worth hearing."

"You must come, it would be simply deadly dull without you."

"Father will go sketching."

"Some bottled beer and a few sandwiches."

"I have a splendid idea! The best thing we can do is to——"

"Knit one, purl one, take the slipped stitch over."

This last from the Whitey-Brown Person, who turned a duskier hue when she heard her own voice rise clearly on an unexpected stillness.

"What would *you* like to do?" asked a voice suddenly in the Little Teacher's ear. It was the Medical, and he turned a kindly, honest, if somewhat freckled, countenance, to his quiet little neighbour.

To tell the truth the Brown-eyed Girl had asked him privately to notice the little new-comer. To please those brown eyes he would have entered on a much harder task, and yet he had let two-thirds of the meal go by before he had made up his mind how to break the ice. His companion looked so grave and shy; a lady every inch of her, and yet quite different from other girls, somehow, that is, when he came to think of it, she wasn't exactly a girl, not like his own sisters, at any rate, nor the glorious creature with the brown eyes. . . .

Here he went off into a rosy dream, to be interrupted by a glance from the aforesaid brown eyes, which said as plainly as words:

"Do as you are told, naughty boy, and make yourself agreeable, at once!"

So: "What would *you* like to do?" asked the

Medical, offering at the same time a glass dish loaded with golden honey-comb.

The Little Teacher, recalled suddenly to her own personality, broke her bread nervously as she replied:

"Oh! I! anything will do for me."

"Well, you know," continued the young fellow, "it is like this—we have got into the habit of all going out together in a mass. It doesn't sound tempting, but works out jolly well in practice. You see, it is easy enough to pair off once started," this with a boyish blush under the freckles. "Any way," he went on, "no one is obliged to come, and, as a matter of fact, one or two do as a rule go off on their own. At the same time, no one need be left out in the cold. You go or stay just as you like."

On the whole the Little Teacher thought she would like to go with the others, though she did feel rather flustered at the idea of making one of so large a party.

"Shall we go far?" she asked, timorously.

"Can't say till the programme's settled."

"And who will settle it?" queried the Little Teacher, looking round in vague wonderment; for to judge from the river of suggestions which just then flooded the breakfast table, with here and there a fearsome sounding Welsh name floating like a straw on its surface, no two of the guests had any intention of tamely agreeing with any one else's proposal.

"How will they ever settle it?" she asked her companion, with rather a helpless little smile.

"They'll be saved the trouble," he replied, with a chuckle.

"They'll talk and talk, but—" here he lowered his voice—"you see that girl in black," with a slight glance at the Effective Girl. "They may say what they like, and think they are going to get their own way, but in the end *she* always settles it. They might as well make up their minds to it at the first—I always do."

"But why?" the Little Teacher could not help asking.

"Why?" he returned, "ah, why? Why does the river run to the sea, or the tide follow the moon? (a thing, by the way, that has never seemed very clear to my dense understanding.) Some things are not explainable, they just *are*, that is all." Even as he spoke the clamour round the table was certainly subsiding, one or two plans apparently had taken the general fancy, whilst others had been gradually abandoned.

At last, thus spake the Widow:

"Well, it seems to lie between Cwm-Bychan, Maentrwg and Bont-ddu."

"Cwm-Bychan is out of it," put in her niece, quietly, "it's no good for the cyclists."

"They've done it before, but have your own way," said her aunt, easily, as she added more cream to her coffee.

"There then remain but two," suggested the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, "Bont-ddu and the place with the unpronounceable name."

"Montourog."

"Mane-trog."

"Mene-ty-rog."

Came in chorus from those who fancied their Welsh.

"Both are nice," remarked the Effective Girl. "There is a very interesting church, I believe, at Maentrwg. But—" looking out of the window, where a cloudless blue sky and motionless tree-tops flouted her concluding words—"but there would be a head wind that way. It must be Bont-ddu to-day, I think."

"Her own suggestion. I knew she would carry it from the first," whispered the Medical, gleefully, to his companion.

"And where or what is Bont-ddu?" the Little Teacher questioned in reply.

"I don't know, and I don't suppose any one else does but the Almighty 'She.' However, we've got to go there, and may as well make the best of it."

The party at the table now broke up to re-assemble in the hall whilst final arrangements were being made. Mine Host flitted from one to another, whispering mysteriously into each ear, and jotting down notes with a nibbled pencil on a torn envelope.

The Little Teacher greatly wondered over his occupation until informed by the Boy that the seemingly secret communications only related to the number of guests requiring carriage room and the amount of bottled beer, claret, and such like, booked for the luncheon-basket.

"It is to be a picnic, you know," he volunteered, as

he moved off to join the ring of men, which, it seemed, perpetually encircled the Effective Girl.

Amongst these, but not of them, standing indeed a little apart, his arms folded, every limb rigid, was the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face.

The Effective Girl marked him with her lash-shrouded eyes. His allegiance was evidently half-hearted, and did not suit her ideas of supremacy.

"Do you bike?" she inquired, addressing him directly.

"Unfortunately not," was the quiet rejoinder.

"What a pity," said the Effective Girl, "because all the young ones do, leaving the carriage for the old fogies," with a roguish look at the fat, black back of her aunt, which with its snowy lappets made a conspicuous screen, behind which the Whitey-Brown Person was having a few soft, shy words with the Parson.

A minute later the Little Teacher saw that the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face had left the charmed circle and was at her side.

"Do you, too, cycle?" he asked.

"No, I have—never—learnt," she answered, timidly.

"Then I, for one, shall be content to be reckoned an old fogy," he replied. But he looked straight ahead as he said it, and it sounded not in the least complimentary, though the Little Teacher felt vaguely that it ought to, and accounted in that way for the hot flush that mounted, unbidden, to her usually pale cheeks.

Her companion evidently did not notice her

confusion, for he continued in the same stolid way:

"I believe we shall have some fun here. I am glad I came."

"So am I," she chimed in eagerly. Then, seeing her mistake, "I mean I am glad *I* came, not that *you* came. No, I don't mean that—oh dear! how rude I've been," as the tall figure in grey deserted her as suddenly as he had come.

CHAPTER XII

SOME COMMENTS AND A BICYCLE

THE morning shadows had not yet grown short, and the dew still lay on the pastures, when the Little Teacher found herself one of a party tightly packed into a large waggonette. The three horses, despite their somewhat ill-groomed condition, looked fit enough as they rattled their bits and pawed up the slaty gravel, snuffing the morning air impatient for a start.

Opposite the Little Teacher sat the Artist and his Wife, whilst the two seats next her own were occupied by the Widow and the Parson, who were already putting their heads together over some joke which made the former ruddier than usual, whilst the latter laughed in an unpleasant sort of a way which, though she could not tell why, hurt the Little Teacher's modesty.

She turned her head aside.

On the box-seat was the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, and by his side, strange to say, the Effective Girl. She looked round at this very moment to reply laughingly to some query addressed to her from the body of the vehicle.

"I changed my mind at the last; it really is too hot for cycling."

Some of the party evidently did not think so.

The Brown-eyed Girl was leaning on her dainty little Humber, whilst the Medical, with his mount inverted on the short smooth turf, was explaining some patent back-pedalling action as applied to a free wheel.

The Boy with a very red face was pumping the heavy-looking machine belonging to the Old-Young Lady, who, clad in the shortest of skirts and the most uncompromising of stiff collars, was doing the gushing "Oh-is-that-the-way-how-clever-you-are-helpless-innocent-line-don't-you-know."

When the bicycles at last were ready; some one having made the inevitable rush back for a lamp, and some one else for a forgotten oil-can; when the driver had eased his brake and whipped up his horses; when the gravel was already scrunching beneath the wheels; down the steps came the Whitey-Brown Person.

Universal consternation. She had been forgotten. The horses were stopped, the cyclists dismounted.

She approached the already crowded vehicle with a mild gaze over her spectacles.

"I am afraid I am late," she said, "I did book a place—but——! It's of no consequence if there is no room."

There was a hasty glance along the line both sides. The thin people looked at the fat ones, the fat endeavoured to see a place opposite.

"It's all my niece's fault," whispered the Widow, in an audible aside to the Parson, "she said she was going to ride, you know."

"And exercised a woman's privilege and changed her mind," chuckled he. And both seemed to think it an excellent joke.

Meanwhile the Whitey-Brown Person stood balancing herself first on one foot and then on the other. She so obviously did not wish to crowd any one, on the other hand she very plainly did not want to be left behind.

"I think we could make room," said the Artist's Wife, gently.

"Can you bike?" asked the Widow, suddenly, checking her laughter, "because if you can you are welcome to my niece's bicycle."

At this the Effective Girl turned upon her high perch, and the Little Teacher fancied she caught a black glance subtly conveyed to the Widow, but no remark was made. The Whitey-Brown Person admitted with rather a timid air that she bicycled a little. Buttons was hastily despatched for the proffered machine, and after some further pumping and altering of saddle and handle-bar, during which the horses rattled and stamped, and the Widow yawned behind her hand, the Whitey-Brown Person was at length got into position, made a wobbly circuit of the drive, and fell into the rear as the whole procession started.

And so away through the garden gate, a sharp turn to the left over the ivy-hung bridge and down

the tree-shadowed, sun-splashed road through the clear, crisp, morning air.

The Medical and the Brown-eyed Girl shot gaily ahead, the Boy gallantly escorted the Old-Young Lady, and behind, all alone, wobbled the Whitey-Brown Person. Frantically she grasped the handle-bar, hanging on to the brake for dear life, and plunging again and again perilously near the bramble-hung, rocky road boundaries.

"Oh! my poor bicycle!" sighed the Effective Girl from the box-seat. "Are you not all sorry for it?"

"We are more sorry for its rider," remarked the Artist drily, as he altered the strap of the little sketching-box hung from his shoulder.

"I call it absolutely dangerous," chimed in his wife, as the Whitey-Brown Person suddenly abandoned the brake, and, narrowly escaping a collision with one of the hind wheels, flew past, feet frantically pedalling, head bent forward, and a death-hold of the handle-bar.

"She'll never get to Bont-ddu alive," said the Widow. She said it with a chuckle. One or two joined in the laugh.

The Little Teacher felt hurt. Her colour rose.

"She did not *choose* to ride," she said, clearly.

There was a childish accent of reproach in her tone.

"Needs must when the devil drives," said the Parson, and the laugh went round again, the Effective Girl laughing the loudest of all.

The Little Teacher was a gentle little soul, apt to look on all her fellows with kindly eyes; but at that moment she felt to hate the tall, trim girl in black who looked so cool, erect, and dainty, lightly laughing the while at the toiling, perspiring sister-woman whom the horses had again overtaken as she careered past the post-office and blacksmith's shop and over the bridge of Artro.

What troubled the Little Teacher the most was that no one but herself seemed troubled.

It was rather a selfish place then, this beautiful holiday world, where every one ought to have been so happy.

The eyes of the Artist's Wife were perhaps a trifle sad, and the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face sat straight and square, not responding at all apparently to the continual volley of merry chatter the Effective Girl was firing off for his amusement. Perhaps he, too, was disgusted with her. The Little Teacher felt drawn to him in consequence.

Now the village was passed the horses bent their necks to a steep rise. Already the sun was sufficiently hot to make grateful the odorous shadows of the firs that bordered either side of the way. Two tiny dots ahead marked the Medical and Brown-eyed Girl already at the summit of the hill. The nearer cyclists had dismounted, and the Boy, good English boy, was pushing the Whitey-Brown one's bicycle as well as his own; but the Little Teacher noticed that as the carriage passed him he cast a wistful glance up at the box-seat.

"Poor Boy," laughed the Effective Girl, gaily, "and I promised so faithfully last night that I would ride with him to-day."

"Are your promises always so faithfully broken?" asked the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face.

"Only those made by moonlight," retorted the Girl.

"We must all then beware of the witching hour," returned the man.

"He doesn't seem to dislike her," mused the Little Teacher, who, from her seat half under the overlapping rugs on which the Effective Girl was seated, could not fail to hear the box-seat conversation. "He does not dislike her. I hope he will not get to like her."

Here she stopped amused at her own thoughts, for what was the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, or his companion either, to her.

Just then the driver drew up to point out a hole by the wayside where some two generations since the head of a murdered man had lain.

"And you may fill it, and fill so often as you can but the hole will still be there. My grantfather, him that lived at Dos-y-vang," pointing with his whip among the distant hills, "I have heard him tell, many's the time, how he filled it full and full with stones, *indeed*; and he watched there, behint the hedge, the whole night through, and not one step did he hear, not one peoples did he see, and yet in the morning—there was the hole as empty as my handt."

"He means his head," whispered the Parson to the Widow.

"A wonderful story," remarked the Artist.

"Truly wonderful!" more than one voice agreed, though every one tried to have a look at the wayside hole as the horses started again.

"The hole is certainly there," said the Widow.

"Oh-h-h-h-h!" came from the seat next the door, where Mine Host sat in charge of the hamper of bottles.

Now the little village of Dyffryn was clattered through, and away along the winding country road. On one side across sweet-smelling marshy fields was the sea, blue, unruffled, under the summer sky; on the other rose the hills, not high here nor very rugged, but heather-tufted, tree sprinkled, with ever and again a cosy white-washed farm blinking out through the little group of sycamores that would serve to shield it somewhat from the brine-laden winds of winter. On the last steep rise before entering Barmouth the driving-party overtook the Medical and the Brown-eyed Girl slowly walking the hill.

"How hot she looks! We old fogies have got the best of it," laughed the Effective Girl gaily to her companion.

The Little Teacher looked at the cyclists as they were slowly left behind, and was not so sure about having the best of it. True, the Medical's face was fiery red, and he was mopping his moist brow with a limp rag of a handkerchief; but the blue eyes

beneath that brow looked very happy, and the heightened colour in the Brown-eyed Girl's face was only just enough to be becoming, whilst nothing could be prettier than the little wet rings of hair under the cool straw she was wearing.

Then the Little Teacher threw a look back along the dusty ribbon of the road, and there was that valiant Boy towing the Whitey-Brown Person, whilst with one hand he pushed the Old-Young Lady on her way, and he was laughing too, his merry boyish peal sounded clearly through the still air.

Truly there is much valour which is never rewarded by a V.C.

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"But I say, joking apart, can't they pack her in somehow and stow the bicycle here till we come back? This sort of thing isn't good enough, you know."

"Sorry, old chap," said the Medical, "I'm afraid you have had more than your share, but we'll see how we can fix it up among us."

"Even then, there's the other," said the Boy, sadly, as he too passed up the steps.

But hope returned with a bottle of Bass. It seemed as the Old-Young Lady and the Whitey-Brown Person fraternised over a split lemonade, that the latter owned the day was rather warm for riding, and the former confessed she had never really seen Barmouth, and between them they arranged a nice little plan by which they two should be left behind in that pleasant town.

"Till called for," said the Old-Young Lady. "I hear it is a very gay place; but I know you won't mind chaperoning me," she added to the Whitey-Brown Person, who assented with a wan smile. Nothing greatly mattered to her if only she were dissociated from that terrible bicycle for even a few hours.

Every one agreed the arrangement was a very suitable one, the Widow remarking in a stage aside:

"Thank Heaven, we are spared an accident. I hate the sight of blood."

"Bicycles don't bleed," put in the Effective Girl. "All the same, I am glad that for the present mine is out of danger."

"Something else may not be quite so safe," said

the Old-Young-Lady, with an arch glance at the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face.

He was rolling a cigarette, and paid no heed.

All once more resumed their places, and away they went through the rambling, uneven street, scattering cyclists and pedestrians, sandalled, brown-legged children and their nurses, donkeys with giggling riders, fishermen carrying bundles of nets, and gaily dressed ladies whose brilliant sunshades made great splashes of colour against the slaty-grey of the houses. Away past the harbour where little yachts were lying stranded on their sides, and children were paddling in seaweedy pools, and bigger boys playing cricket on the level sands.

The horses slackened pace as they toiled slowly up a steep rise. The summit of this gained, a glorious view broke on the sight. Cader-Idris a warm gold in the morning sunlight, behind the pearly-grey of the Dolgelly range; for foreground a rocky promontory crowned by a fantastic tower; and below and beyond the level lessening stretches of pinkish-yellow sand, barred by blue-grey glints of placid water.

The Little Teacher stood up in her excitement.

"Stop, oh! stop!" she cried. "Has any one, any of you," her words almost choked her, "ever seen anything so beautiful? The mountains! I never dreamed they would be like this."

She sat down exhausted with emotion, and quite unconscious of any one or anything but the beauties of Nature before her.

The Artist and his Wife smiled together over her enthusiasm. It was a kindly smile, and good to see.

The Parson and the Widow smiled too. It was as well the Little Teacher's eyes were elsewhere. As for the Effective Girl, she muttered, "Pose."

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face caught sight of the little, eager countenance, eradiated by selfless happiness, and thought to himself, "I was right. She is worth cultivating. Such fresh, child-like enjoyment is not easily met with in this worn-out age."

As for the Girl beside him, though he received her attentions with due courtesy, she interested him not at all; he had met her, or at least her facsimile, in most of the hotels and boarding-houses of Europe, he had danced with her sisters in Egypt, and ridden with her first cousins in India. He knew beforehand how she would take all the well-turned compliments he had used so often before, the exact retort she would give to each of his witty remarks. She never disappointed him, he had found that out already; she never rose above or fell below his expectations; and it was all flat, stale, and unprofitable. The Brown-eyed Girl was much more to his taste, though he could not say but what he had met her before, too, a typical English girl, and quite taken up with her honest, commonplace admirer.

These two had stayed behind, ostensibly to watch a train over the viaduct, but "we know better." Love's young dream, and all that sort of thing.

Lucky dog! Well, we all have our day. And that other, younger lad, relieved of his ancient charges, had sped on far ahead. By the way, he seemed rather "gone" on the black-and-white decoction on the box-seat. It was almost a pity for so promising a boy to singe his wings so soon. He'll be badly burnt, and think all women like her—which Heaven forbid!

And whilst these thoughts were running through the brain of the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, he did not fail to respond from force of habit, perhaps, to the lively chatter and airy banter of the girl beside him.

"Another case," said the Parson behind his hand to the Widow.

"Oh, they all go down like trees before the axe; the worst of it is she won't take even a single one of them for better or worse."

"Well, you'd hardly wish her to take any but a *single* one," chortled the Parson. He evidently carried out the apostolic injunction to be all things to all men, so different was he showing himself from the pleasant-mannered gentleman of last night's table-d'hôte.

The Little Teacher could not help overhearing the low-toned conversation he had been carrying on with the Widow during the drive, so child-natured was she in spite of her years, that she did not at all understand it, yet it made her vaguely uncomfortable. It seemed so strange to her when the most exquisite scenery was unfolding bit by bit around them; when

the Artist, venerable man, sat silent in face of beauty greater than he could express, and his wife, her blue eyes misty with pleasure, laid her hand on his with sympathy ; when others, even more everyday people, were calling one another's attention, here to a distant peak, there to a glimpse of blue water between pine-hung crags ; it seemed strange that these two beside her should, quite regardless of the nobility of their surroundings, be talking—*that* sort of talk. The Little Teacher could express it to herself in no other way. She tried to deaden her ears, and put all her soul into her eyes, but unsavoury drops kept filtering through. Presently she became aware that the conversation had centred round the Man-with-the Wooden-Face.

" No, I know nothing about him," the Widow was saying, " he only came last night, you see. I'll soon find out whether he's married, though. If he is it's no use my niece wasting her time like that," for a peal of thin laughter came from the box-seat where the picture-hat was very near the wooden figure-head next to it.

" I don't think he's married, somehow," continued the Widow, " and I can generally reckon them up."

" He doesn't quite strike me as a bachelor," said the Parson.

" Yet if he's got a wife, why don't he say so ? " returned his companion, almost indignantly. She was beginning to be rather tired of trotting her attractive niece about, with no matrimonial results

and considered that at least the other side should play fair.

"If he's got a wife, where is she?" she continued.

"Perhaps underground," said the Parson's thick voice. And they both seemed to think this an excellent joke.

Meanwhile, the Effective Girl had been palming off on the Man with the Wooden Face a favourite device of hers with new-comers in boarding-houses. This consisted in satirising her fellow-guests by likening them to animals. It was not very clever, perhaps, certainly not in very good taste; but it had never so far failed to amuse, and that was the great thing.

"Keep them amused," her aunt had said when her niece had first come under her wing, a pert sallow child with a quantity of raven-black hair hanging limply about her shoulders. Not a pretty child, by any means, but the Widow had seen her niece's possibilities even then, and had doubtless done much for her according to her lights.

"A man wants two things," was a favourite maxim of hers, "to be fed and to be amused;" and since she had married a husband and buried him, she spoke with some authority. Though, as her niece once remarked to an admirer, "I have never asked auntie pat out whether it was excellence of food or surplus of amusement that brought on the fit of apoplexy which left her a Widow, comfortably provided for."

So the Effective Girl, to the best of her belief, was keeping the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face amused

as she likened her fellow-travellers, one to a pig, because he gluts, "didn't you notice him over his soup?" another to a petted little spaniel, "with those absurd ringlets"; another to a Newfoundland puppy, "he always treads on one's feet and knocks things over," which was a gross libel on the Medical, who, though big and loose-limbed, never forgot the credit of the public school of which not so long since he had been a popular member. Then the unfortunate Whitey-Brown Person was one of those thin, sandy cats with the green eyes and plaintive mew, "who seem born without a cream saucer or warm cushion of their own, and go about worrying other people with their complaints."

All of this was neither very true nor very amiable, yet the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face encouraged her to continue, wondering cynically how often the same old game had been handled before, and to what animal he, himself, would be likened when another male, the Boy, perchance, was being treated to a repetition of the farce.

The sun had by this time grown hot overhead, and no one was sorry when the waggonette drew up at a pretty wayside inn, bearing the sign of "The Half-Way House."

Mine Host intimated that here was the bourne to which they had been journeying, and volunteered further that if the party would kindly proceed through a certain gate and on to a woody knoll, he and the man would see to the horses and follow with the baskets.

"I hope to goodness they'll be quick about it," sighed the Widow, as she descended heavily to the ground, "I'm simply dying for food and drink."

The Effective Girl descended effectively from the box-seat chattering volubly, and trying to draw what she believed to be her latest conquest in chains behind her triumphal progress. But the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face evidently objected to his share in the proposed pageant; for with some pretence concerning an imaginary walking-stick left in the vehicle now already standing inert, denuded of its horses, he managed to avoid her and attach himself to the Little Teacher.

The Effective Girl had to content herself with the radiant Boy, who, having scorched the whole way from Barmouth, now came out of the inn, looking delightfully fresh and cool after a wash and any amount of—well—whatever boys of his kind do drink when they are quite alone and really thirsty.

And so, two and two, the party passed on, bent, as is usual, in this year of grace, wherever the spot, whatever the function, on having a good feed. Of such gross stuff and so very near the animal are the best of us, in spite—or is it because—of our boasted civilisation.

CHAPTER XIV

"THERE IS ALWAYS THE QUIET POOL"

THE party lingered long over their meal, which was a pleasant one in spite of the fact that some of the glasses were unfortunately broken, and one or two bottles of beer were lacking, having gone off with the heat, as Mine Host affirmed with a sickly air, as though he hardly expected any one to believe him.

The Medical and the Brown-eyed Girl arrived late. Something had gone wrong with one of the bicycles, they explained rather vaguely. No one questioned them further as they dropped into their places; she close to her father's side, and he not so far off but what he could wait on her and on her mother, too; which he did with such boyish grace and charming air of penitence that she was soon smiling back at him in spite of her slight vexation at the way in which he had monopolised her daughter.

After luncheon the party dispersed in twos or threes, and wandered along the river shore, or penetrated the shady depths of the overhanging woods.

When at length they regathered the sun was already casting long shadows across the mountains.

"Won't you come on the box for the return journey?" said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face to the Little Teacher.

"No thank you," she answered hurriedly. She could not fancy herself in so prominent a position.

"Why not?" urged the other, "you enjoy the scenery so much, and you will have a far better view up there."

"I'd rather not," she repeated, flushing like a shy child.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face liked to see her flush. It was cruel of him, for the colour does not rise easily at the Little Teacher's age. Perhaps he was not cruel, it may be that his heart as well as his face was of wood. His next words were, at any rate, kind.

"Very well," he said, "then I shall come inside, too. When I am in the midst of Nature's beauties I like to be by some one congenial."

Whereat the Little Teacher flushed again, but this time with pleasure.

So when the Effective Girl had been gravely handed up to her place by her sometime cavalier, he as gravely left her and seated himself in his selected position.

The Parson, having lingered in the inn for a stirrup-cup, was this time the odd-man-out, and dragged up his bulky carcase to the high seat in front amid general laughter.

There he was soon quite at home to judge from the shaking of his broad back, and the peals of merry

laughter that came from behind the black and white of the Effective Girl's sunshade.

After all, the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face did not talk much to his quiet little neighbour, for he was soon drawn into conversation with the Artist. Together they led the discourse through rich Florentine Galleries, whence they wandered off into the Dutch Schools.

The Little Teacher listened in quiet wonderment. Things she had never heard spoken of, had scarcely even read of in books, seemed as familiar to these men as were to her the lamp-posts and hoardings of her daily round. How narrow her past life now seemed! Twenty years bounded by a few miles of dreary streets whilst other people had been seeing all the wonders of the world.

The eyes that looked out over the estuary, now green and sparkling with the incoming tide, were somewhat dim. She almost wished she had never left her dingy lodging; there she had been in a certain sense contented; little things had been her great things only because she had never conceived of the greater beyond. How could she ever bear to return to it?

She was roused from her meditation by the shrill hoot of a steamer. Clatter, clatter went the horses round a sharp corner, and there was the harbour, all alive now with craft coming and going; the little steamer crowded to the rails, ploughing her easy way up the estuary, and leaving a long line of creamy foam in her wake. The sunlight was sparkling on the

swift-rushing tide; the wheeling sea-birds were crying aloud as they poised and dipped again and again after their fishy prey. The fresh strong sea-breeze licked up from the shore, driving the heat of the day far inland, and filling all lungs with buoyancy.

The Little Teacher's spirits rose again. After all, it was only the first day of her holiday; she had nearly three weeks still before her, why trouble herself about the end?

So her eyes became bright again, and she was able to join in the general laugh when the familiar figures of the Old-Young Lady and the Whitey-Brown Person came into view, absurdly bulging fore and aft in a miniature dog-cart drawn by a tiny donkey.

It appeared the two giddy young things had had a lively day all to themselves, and were anxious when the brake drew up at the Cors-y-Gedol to recount, the one in shrill the other in plaintive tones, how they had been persuaded by a fisherman, a very nice man and so talkative, to cross the estuary to the golf course and take a tram, "but oh! such a funny little tram, run by one horse," to see some waterfall. "We never found the waterfall, but it was all very nice and exciting, and here we are safe and sound."

"And how about cycling back?" questioned the Widow, as the party were once more taking their seats.

The face of the Whitey-Brown Person fell.

"I am rather tired," she faltered.

"I am sure you must be," said the Effective Girl, graciously. "I will ride and you shall have my place."

Whereupon the warm-hearted Little Teacher regretted she had misjudged the Widow's niece.

"She is kind, after all," she thought.

But the Widow herself remarked grimly to the Parson, by whom she had again managed to secure a seat, "What's her little game now?"

And the Effective Girl was saying in a caressing tone to the eager Boy:

"You silly fellow, of course I meant all along to give you the homeward journey. It is so much more romantic than riding in the broiling sun, don't you think so?"

Doubtless he did. For though they went at an easy rate, the Old-Young Lady could not quite keep within earshot, and arrived home in a very bad temper in consequence.

Meanwhile, the Little Teacher, having waited modestly for the more important personages to enter the vehicle before her, found to her surprise that the only vacant seat was the box one, to which the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face quietly handed her.

"Fate," he said, briefly, as he seated himself beside her, and they were again on the move. "You refused before, but now you have no choice."

"Do you believe in Fate?" asked the Little Teacher.

Some light answer rose to her companion's lips,

it would have passed them had his neighbour been the Effective Girl, but the Little Teacher asked the question so simply and withal so earnestly in spite of her smiling lips, that the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face took pause before he replied:

"It depends on what you understand by Fate."

The Little Teacher, in her turn, conscientiously thought before she answered. She had come upon the scene, as it were, without any rehearsals, and did not want to be hissed off the stage; so she considered a moment, then she made reply:

"My idea of Fate is that which happens to us through no fault of ours, and by no wish of our own."

"Would not that describe other things equally well? birth, say, or death."

"But are not birth and death Fate?"

"Nay, rather that which comes between."

"Which is, I suppose, different for every one of us."

"I am not so sure. Who was it said: 'To be born, to marry, and to die, in those words every life-story is told'?"

"But every one does not marry," objected the Little Teacher, who was nothing if not exact. A result perhaps of twenty years' supervision of beginners on the piano. "Every one does not marry."

"No, what did another sage say on that point? 'Those who are *not* married wish they were, and those who *are* married wish they were not.'"

"Do you think that is true?" said the Little Teacher, rather wistfully.

"As regards that, I am not in a position to say."

"Yet," she continued, thoughtfully, "you ought to know because you must be one or the other yourself."

"One or the other, how?"

"Either married or not married, I mean," said the Little Teacher, innocently.

"Is it a very simple child, or a very artful woman?" said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face to himself.

But aloud he only remarked:

"We have wandered altogether from Fate and our belief in it. Personally I own to being a bit of a Fatalist. Our life is without doubt to a large extent settled beforehand; if not by a Higher Power, as some hold, at any rate by heredity and circumstance. We fancy we have its making and marring in our own hands. Well! I suppose it serves to please the little ones and keep them busy; but all the while what is going to happen is bound to happen, so why not take things easily?"

The Little Teacher ventured to glance at him, for he did not look at her in speaking, but straight over the horses' heads.

That hard immovable face might have been schooled by philosophy to take the blows of existence with placidity, but it certainly did not impress an onlooker as belonging to one professing a creed of ease.

From the face beside her the Little Teacher looked back over the barren years behind her. Certainly they had been settled for her without any volition of her own, and might have continued unbroken to the grave, had not that lucky prize been hers. That, certainly, was Fate, or luck, which she supposed was much the same thing. Something, at any rate, had taken good care she had had little to do with the planning of her life in the past. And the future? Here the ground seemed uncertain beneath her feet. There was something indescribably thrilling in the idea of that future being already planned out, and she the principal actor in it in absolute ignorance of the part she was to play. Her heart beat more quickly as she wondered what that part might be.

"Have you ever thought you would like to read the future, and know just what was coming to your lot?" she said after a pause.

There was no hurry in this quiet conversation carried on to the accompaniment of the rhythmic clack, clop, of the horses' feet, while the low sun was touching all before them with warm light, the smell of dewy meadows was filling the balmy air with sweetness, and the people behind them had hushed their giddy chatter of the earlier day to lower sleepier tones.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face did not answer at once, his eyes appeared fixed on two figures ahead, whose long shadows intermingled on the pale, level road.

At last he said slowly:

"One cannot realise the impossible, for could I look into the future, and see certain things I wot of, happening—well, rather than meet them—there is a deep pool they tell me up on the Nantcol river! That would end it. Where then would vanish those other happenings kindly provided beforehand by Fate?"

"Nay," broke in the Little Teacher, warming to the subject, "in that case, seeing your future held only the deep pool, only the deep pool would you see."

"But then," argued the Man, "there would be no *raison d'être* for the deep pool if the other happenings were rendered by it null and void; and so we argue in a circle and come round to the point where we started, that one cannot realise the impossible."

"Nevertheless, I sometimes wish I could read my future," said the Little Teacher; "you see, so little has happened in my past."

"Is that so?" put in the man to himself.

"I should like," she continued, musingly, "to have a glance down the long years to come, and see what they will bring me."

"I hope they will bring you happiness," said he.

"And if not?"

"There is always the quiet pool," he returned jestingly.

Then there was silence.

The sun had now gone down. Pale twilight had

almost unknown, commenced to steal the light from the sky, the colour from the land.

The horses' hoofs sounded clear and monotonous, and the Little Teacher found herself repeating softly:

"There is always the quiet pool."

CHAPTER XV

"WON'T THE POOR BOY BE SAVAGE!"

THE Effective Girl was out of humour. The unprecedented had happened. Here was she on her own well-trodden boarding-house ground, and far from being an acknowledged queen, there was as yet only one beggarly boy really prostrate at her feet.

Of the others? The Effective Girl ran over them lightly with mind and fingers. Mine Host—he scarcely counted, though his cringing devotion was not without its uses as ensuring prompt attention and the best of everything that was going. The Parson—he was all right, quite ready to flirt when he was wanted, and devoted to auntie at other times. Things were after all not so bad. The Artist—the Effective Girl looked in her mirror. The running commentary on her admirers, assured or desired, accompanied the deft manipulation of a filmy black "toilette" lit by touches of silver. The Effective Girl was not in mourning, but she never wore anything but black and white, so her aunt had long

ago decreed. She stated it gave her niece just that air of distinction her particular style required.

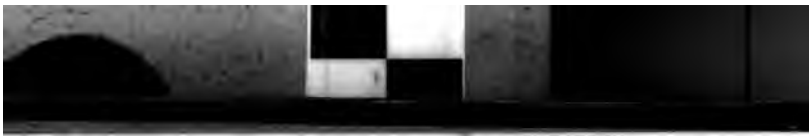
The Girl looked in her mirror.

"Does the Artist think you beautiful?" she questioned of her reflection. "He is not the kind of man to pay compliments," she went on, "but he has looked at you once or twice in an admiring sort of way. I wish he would ask to paint your portrait; but then he is a landscape painter, unfortunately for you. I don't know what people see in pictures of trees and things. It strikes me you had better make friends with his wife—awful nuisance, but it might lead to a visit."

She sighed as she clasped a string of pearls round her neck, and then went on:

"Your neck's as white as ever. I honestly don't think you've gone off one little bit, and you're two-and-twenty if you are a day. Two-and-twenty and not married yet! But to go on with these tiresome men: there's the Medical student, he is rather young, but well-off I should say. I'm afraid I've rather neglected him and let that little Brown-eyed Girl have it all her own way there. I must put a spoke in her wheel. Let me see, I'll accompany my own songs to-night and make him turn the pages for me. We have never known that fail," she concluded, with a smile and a nod at the reflection in the glass, whilst her nimble fingers settled a few coral ash-berries more daintily in the cloudy black of her dress.

But her face again grew grave.



"After all, he's not worth trying for," she remarked. "I know who is though. That distinguished-looking man who arrived yesterday. If he is not married already, that is to say. I can't feel quite sure on that point, but I've put auntie on the track, *she'll* find out. I was getting on swimmingly with him this morning then something put him off. I can't think he finds any attraction in that dowdy little personage who arrived at the same time. Good heavens! what an ill-fitting dress, and what utter waste of that splendid head of hair. All the same, he and she walked together by moonlight; I must prevent that to-night." She laughed softly to herself, then added, "Won't the poor Boy be savage!"

This last reflection restored her good humour, and with plans ready laid, and armed *cap-à-pied* for conquest, the Effective Girl went smilingly downstairs to dinner.

CHAPTER XVI

'I AM SO HAPPY"

IN another upstair, rose-scented chamber, the Little Teacher had laid aside the neat tailor-made and had brought out the maligned evening-frock, comfortable in the fond delusion that it fitted her to perfection; happy in the fact that the spray of honeysuckle, which accorded so well with the soft silk blouse, had been plucked by "him" and given with the quiet words:

"Take my advice, enjoy the present and don't trouble about the future."

Some impulse of mischief had prompted her to reply, as their hands touched for an instant under the flowers:

"Who cares for the future? There is always the quiet pool."

Then she had turned and fled upstairs with the heart and footsteps of a child. She was so happy, indeed, she did not fear to look in her mirror to-night.

"I am sure I am growing younger," she told herself with a glad little laugh, "and happier every hour."

Dinner passed with bright lights and laughter, the play of knives and forks and shining eyes, the clamour of cheerful voices. After dinner came proposals for a stroll by moonlight, for again it was a glorious night, clear, pale, and dewy.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face had already singled out his companion of the previous evening.

"She is unfolding," he said to himself. "I believe she is really young but some strange event or untoward influence has blighted her youth. The point is, is it too late to recover what she has lost? I should like to see that little face grow brighter and brighter as the mind within expanded." He was following her light figure down the steps, when there was a slight stumble at his side, a hand was laid on his arm, and a voice said in his ear: "Oh dear, I've nearly broken my ankle, do some one take pity on poor me, I'm as blind as a bat when I come out of a lighted room into the night."

There was a hovering Boy in eager attendance. The Artist's briar-pipe starred the night as his courtly voice said, "Allow me." Mine Host's long-drawn "Oh-h!" sounded from the rear. The Effective Girl glanced neither to right nor left, but leaning a little heavily on the captured arm bore off the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face in triumph. And they talked of theatres and concerts, and ping-pong, and Alfred Austin's poems, until the night air grew cool and a general move was made back into the cheerful house.

The Little Teacher thus left alone had done her best to solace a melancholy Boy, who, with his hands

thrust deep into the pockets of his very new evening clothes, and lowered eyes regarding with fixed melancholy the shining alternate toes of his evening shoes, gave forth his opinion that life was not worth having take it altogether. Just when a fellow was a little bit happy something was sure to come and spoil it all. With more in a rather fierce tone about old bucks who have had their day putting their ugly hoofs in where they were not wanted, with a vicious sidelong glance at two figures standing in the full of the moon, one straight, hard, immovable, the other pliant, willowy, with a sparkle of silver and a glint of bluish lustre that was her crown of dark hair.

Poor Boy, there was to be no luck for him that night, for later on he found himself wedged in a corner behind the Widow and the Parson, looking on with angry eyes whilst his goddess sang tender love songs to the Medical, who, polite but obviously ill at ease, was turning over music of which he could not read a note.

"And I always know just when to turn," sighed the Boy to himself, "and she never even asked *me*."

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face had challenged the Artist to a game of chess. The Little Teacher from her quiet corner was watching them. Both were intent on their play. The Artist, one hand rumpling his grey moustache, considering each move with knit brows and pausing before his fingers left the piece. His opponent, without a single change of feature, moved each time, sharply, instantly. Yet he

was having the best of the game, or so the silent watcher concluded.

Her quiet thoughts were disturbed by a rustle at her elbow ; it was Ringlets seating herself on a spare foot of the sofa. She never on principle allowed any of her guests, as she loved to call them, even a moment of peaceful idleness ; she was always possessed by a feverish fear that they were feeling dull and would consequently begin mentally to find fault with the cuisine. She had noted amid the general chatter and movement one silent figure, and, though she inwardly considered the Little Teacher a poor thing, sadly wanting in style, owned that her money was as good as anybody's, and she had as much right to its worth.

Ringlets' business principles, at all events, were sound. So she attacked the Little Teacher with cheerful questions about the day's outing. She, on her part, would much rather have continued a silent onlooker, for Mine Host's sister always rather jarred upon her. Yet she replied pleasantly, relating some of the incidents of the drive.

"I am sure our lovely air is doing you good," said Ringlets, presently, "you are getting quite a colour."

The Little Teacher inwardly resented these personalities, but replied brightly :

"The air here is beautiful, and I live in London, but I was quite well when I came."

"You only came for pleasure, then?" said Ringlets. Adding as her eyes travelled slowly over the other's simple attire, "It is well to be you rich people with nothing to do but travel."

The Little Teacher was not going to be drawn.

"It is my holiday," she said, quietly. The artless "antiquarian" at her side need not necessarily know that it was the first in twenty years.

"And are you enjoying yourself?"

"Very much," was the laconic reply, whilst for a moment the grey eyes rested on a trumpet-shaped honeysuckle bloom which had fallen from the cluster at her breast on to the quiet grey of her gown. Ringlets, sharp as a ferret, caught the look.

"What beautiful honeysuckle!" she said. "I did not know there was any left."

"There is plenty just outside the gate," answered the Little Teacher, innocently.

"Oh yes, but high up, far too high for *you* to reach."

The Little Teacher flushed slightly. She did not wish, though she hardly knew why, the ringletted one to know *who* had gathered the blossoms for her.

She was saved the trouble of a reply by a manly voice, which broke in with:

"Is anything really too high for any one to reach if only he means having it?"

It was the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face. He had vanquished the Artist, and now stood tall and straight by the Little Teacher's side.

"They want me to sing," he said. "Will you accompany me?"

The proposal was formidable, but the temptation to be associated with that glorious voice was great.

The Little Teacher knew herself to be a quick and accurate reader. She hesitated.

"She who hesitates is lost," said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, and quietly placing her arm in his he led her to the piano.

For the first few seconds the room swam round, the music-stool rocked beneath her, and the notes danced before her eyes.

But the calm air with which the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face selected a song, and placing it before her said, "Shall we try this, it's very simple?" reassured her somewhat. At first her fingers trembled a little, and the air as she tried it over sounded thin and distant to her ears. But once the man's voice chimed in full and mellow the Little Teacher forgot her fears, forgot everything but joy in the flood of tuneful sound that she was able to accompany, perhaps, even, to aid a little, as she followed it now high, now low, now deep, resonant as a bell, now dying away like an echo among far distant peaks. The chords beneath her fingers grew softer, softer as the voice sank lower, lower, till both music and song died as one in the absolute stillness of the room.

Under cover of the burst of applause which followed, and whilst he placed another song in position, the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face said quite unconcernedly, "A thousand thanks, you are a treasure of an accompanist."

Perhaps he had said the same words before in other ears, but the Little Teacher knew nothing

of this, and had never been so happy in her life. Flushed, eager, she went with new vigour to her task, and in the rousing hunting song that followed surpassed even her previous performance. And when a quaint old ballad succeeded, a tearful thing of blighted love, her fingers seemed enchanted, she scarcely noted the score; for, so it seemed to her, she, too, had lost her first, her only love; she, too, was bidding a passionate farewell to life and hope; round her dying form the cold waters were closing, until her throbbing heart was still.

When another chorus of approval brought her back again to reality she found herself cold and trembling. She looked up at the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face; he was standing quite unmoved by the sensation he had created, studying a song he held in his hand; he thanked the Little Teacher again as she rose and tottered, as it seemed to her own fancy, to the nearest seat. She found herself by the Brown-eyed Girl, who made room for her, saying brightly:

"How well you play, you must be very fond of music, what a pleasure it must be to you."

The Little Teacher in a dazed sort of way replied:

"I never knew I played well before, and this is the first time music has given me any pleasure."

The Brown-eyed Girl squeezed the Little Teacher's hand where it lay on the ottoman between them.

"You dear quiet little soul," she said, "we shall find out all sorts of clevernesses in you presently."

"Oh, I," said the Little Teacher, with a long-

drawn breath, "my part was nothing, but what a gift, that voice!"

"Isn't it splendid!" returned the Brown-eyed Girl, cordially, but without enthusiasm. "The worst of it is no one else will dare to sing after it."

She glanced up at the Medical, who without knowing a note of music had a fine bass voice and a happy knack of rolling out jovial sea songs.

"Will any one want any other songs after that last?" asked the Little Teacher.

She was answered by a general move towards the piano. Some one had suggested part-songs, and was eagerly beating up recruits. The Parson stood up and cleared his throat in a suggestive sort of way, and when tackled by Ringlets owned to having "a bit of voice still."

"We shall want you, little accompanist," said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, smiling with his eyes.

The Little Teacher was as one under a spell. She rose and resumed her seat. After twenty years' dreary rooting in the soil, the tree of her labours shot up in a moment, blossomed, and bore fruit.

"It is well to have lived, to have lived to this day," she said to herself, with glistening eyes, when alone in her room that night.

The tuneful voices still rang in her ears, and one above all others, like, as she told herself with bated breath, like an angel's before the throne of God. And best of all she herself was not a mere listener,

but in the very heart of it all; threading by her quiet help the jewels of harmony together. Only the humble string—yet necessary to the jewels!

"And every one is so kind," she concluded. "I really don't care to-night whether I am old or young, because I'm so happy."

CHAPTER XVII

"I SHOULD NOT CHOOSE HER FOR A WIFE"

ANOTHER dawn rose fair and smiling, and another and another day slipped past, golden, pleasure-laden, sweet with the aroma of bog-myrtle and marshy blooms.

Each morning new plans were discussed, new expeditions arranged. One day a mountain excursion, on which the Widow and the Parson caused great laughter mounted on two rough, under-sized Welsh ponies. On another occasion a merry party invaded the shore between Llanfair and Harlech with bare feet and girded loins on prawning bent. But always, starting how they might, in motley throng or in threes and fours, back they came from mountain, woodland, marsh, or moor, in the old, original, primeval order, two and two, male and female as God Himself created them.

The Widow and the Parson, short sometimes of breath but never of unfailing anecdotes with which to beguile each the other's way. The Artist and his Wife, when they were of the party, together in the

pure communion of for-ever-united souls, their love-dream, begun so long ago, unended and unending.

A little apart, with footsteps that lingered somewhat on sand, rocky path or flowery mead, came the Brown-eyed Girl and the fresh-faced healthy-hearted youth, together in that golden dream that is eternal. Together, too, if open device or less open artifice could compass it, walked the Effective Girl and the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face. She, as the days went on, in deadly earnest at last; she, who had till now aimed at conquering all hearts and as lightly spurning them, herself now tasting of the sickly fruits of doubting love, torturing herself as to whether "he" cared ever so little.

The attraction, moderate at first, regulated by doubts as to whether he on his side were free, had grown into a consuming passion, she cared for nothing now but that he too should feel the burning flame torturing her heart. His very coldness and aloofness only added fuel to her fire. At first she had speculated as to his position and means. Now, looking back, how petty any such thoughts appeared. Why, were he the poorest of the poor, an outcast, even, beyond the pale of society, she still would count it highest honour to be owned as his. She hungered for the slightest notice; could make her heart leap, her pulses thrill with even the recollection of stray glances and might-be-tender words.

All this when alone. Whilst with the rest she was just the same, gay, careless, defiant, laughter-loving, quick-tongued Effective Girl as before

Perhaps she was even a little more effective than usual.

"Don't throw yourself at the man's head," had been her aunt's plain though timely warning. And the Effective Girl, who, though she had lost all control of her heart, still kept some over her head, took pains so to divide her favours as to leave, she flattered herself, some room for jealousy, that ally of all doubting lovers, to work in her favour.

All the time her bright, hard eyes, green only in a full light, black usually beneath their thick lashes, watched like a cat that no one else might secure that upon which she now felt her whole life hung.

There were not many rivals to fear.

The party had, it is true, been increased by the arrival of two pretty girls and their uncle. But they were mere bread-and-butter misses, and the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face had so far scarcely noticed their existence. As the Brown-eyed Girl was fortunately elsewhere disposed of, there only remained that little, badly dressed, dowdy thing who played the adored one's accompaniments. Some attraction she certainly must possess, old as she was, and quite plain, or so the Effective Girl had it, for not only the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face sought her company, but she was becoming quite a general favourite. The Artist, even, whom the Effective Girl, herself, had found utterly unresponsive, was occasionally to be seen holding converse with his daughter's quiet little friend, and seemingly interested too.

Nevertheless, the Effective Girl took care to assure herself, no one could consider such a rival seriously, at the same time she grudged every moment, every word that fell to the Little Teacher's share, as though it were robbed from herself. She plotted and planned and arranged and schemed to attain any and every advantage. And she shuddered when she went to bed at night to see how haggard was her face when the smiling mask had fallen from it.

Meanwhile, the Little Teacher lived as one in a dream. She as little analysed the source of her daily increasing happiness as she speculated concerning the light in which the "he" of her constant thoughts regarded her. She was content with so very little. It was enough that they lived in the same house, breathed the same air, that occasionally for some glorious, long-to-be-remembered half-hour they talked together. He knew and had seen so much, and yet he never let her feel her ignorance. He liked to get a glimpse at life through her undimmed outlook, he told her once. And every evening came the crowning glory of the day when he led her to the piano and through the mazy realms of music she followed his voice as surely as a shadow its owner, and felt a happiness not of earth.

The Effective Girl struck a jarring note once by insisting (offering, she called it) on playing the accompaniment in the Little Teacher's place. It was a sign of how far she had rushed in her mad career, for up to now she had been wisely conscious

of her own limitations, and reading from sight was not one of her carefully displayed accomplishments.

At the conclusion of the first song the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face thanked her and withdrew. On being vigorously assailed for more he refused.

"I think you must have noticed," he said, quietly, "that I am not in voice to-night."

The words and the tone stabbed the Effective Girl to the heart. She bitterly deplored her false move, and as a counter-irritant flung herself into a violent flirtation with the Uncle of the Bread-and-Butter Misses. He was a sandy gentleman with a premature baldness, and a tendency to sentiment after dinner.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face went out alone into the night. The moon had not yet risen, and the glowing end of his cigar passed backwards and forwards across the square of velvety blackness made by the window left open to admit the still, hot, summer air.

The Effective Girl watched each time for the reappearance of that tiny light with a sick sensation at her heart; whilst all the while her thin, hard laugh broke out again and again as she was trying to teach the Sandy Uncle cat's cradle with much tangling of his and her fingers in the string.

Another, too, watched for that dull, red star. The Little Teacher conscientiously playing "Consequences" with a scratch team composed of the Bread-and-Butter Misses, the Old-Young Lady, Ringlets, and the heavy-hearted Boy, found herself waiting

again and again for the tiny glow and the slow, steady tread, both of which brought only happiness to her heart.

"He is near. He is near." Her bird of love was singing, though as yet she was hardly conscious that she entertained any such winged messenger. Perhaps therein lay the secret of her unclouded happiness.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, as he strode and turned, thought within himself and questioned whether he were enjoying his stay at Pen-y-gwyn, whether he had been wise to bury himself in this fashion on the strength of a desire for change. Take them altogether the people here were rather third-rate and uninteresting. His vanity was wounded at the failure of his song. He was used to undeviating success whenever he chose to favour any public with an exhibition of his skill. Of course any fool could see it was the fault of the accompanist; but then he had been a fool to let her fool him into singing to her vile playing. He wasn't very sure whether he were not a fool for his pains in having anything to do with the girl at all. She was stylish and lively, and somehow of late he had always seemed thrown into her company. He didn't consider himself a vain chap (vanity happened in truth to be his greatest failing) but he couldn't help wondering sometimes whether she was making a dead set at him.

"If she only knew all," he thought. He laughed a little dry, hard, laugh, which was turned into a cough by a recollection of all the ready ears in the

gaily lit room he could see so distinctly through the open window.

Then a little scrap of talk amongst a few of the men the night before returned to his mind.

The Parson had asked the Sandy Uncle, as a newcomer, how he liked the "High-stepper."

"She's well enough for a bit of fun," the other had replied, "but I shouldn't choose her for——"

"Your wife," chuckled the Parson.

"Nor I for my friend's wife," put in the Artist's grave voice.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face had himself said nothing; but he recalled how just then the Little Teacher had come into his mind, with her clear, child-like eyes.

"A thousand years younger than the other," he told himself, "whatever her birth certificate might say."

He thought of her again now. What an interesting companionable little soul it was; what an intelligent mind she possessed; how freshly her naïve remarks fell upon the jaded ears of a man of the world. Yet to a certain extent how guarded, how reticent she had been. Beyond the fact that she had been early left an orphan and that this was her first, her very first, holiday, he knew nothing. That elusive past of hers was as much of a mystery as it had been at their first meeting. All the same, or because of this elusiveness, the little creature interested him.

Just then he caught sight of her in the flesh, her

clear profile upturned, the lamp light glinting on the bronze of her hair. She looked so different somehow from the others round her.

He threw away the end of his cigar, drew a full breath of the sweet night air, and exchanged the quietude without for the clatter of the brightly lit room within.

CHAPTER XVIII

"I SUPPOSE WE MUST LET HER GO"

THE next morning the day did not break with the accustomed brilliancy. A hazy mist hid the sun; the air had lost some of its freshness and felt close and oppressive.

"A regular vapour bath," said the Sandy Uncle, cheerfully, as he looked out across the lawn to where the trees stood waist-deep in filmy mist.

"We are going to have a storm," declared the Effective Girl, with a tinge of peevishness in her voice, "and I hate storms."

She spoke as though personally aggrieved.

"Only the pride of the morning!" suggested the Artist. "I fancy it is already clearing. If so I shall wish you people good-bye for the day, as the effect will be just what I need for my Cwm-Bychan."

"Shall I come with you, father?" asked the Brown-eyed Girl.

"Please yourself, love," he said, fondly, as he bent over some canvases he was strapping together. "Only don't get into mischief," he added, with a twinkle of his eye.

Whereat the Brown-eyed Girl blushed furiously, but, nevertheless, could not prevent one swift glance beneath lowered lashes at the Medical, who, bravely clad in Harris tweed and rough stockings, was testing the weight of certain iron-tipped ash-poles he had found in the hall. At her glance he turned and spoke.

"The idea for to-day," said he, "was to drive up Nantcol, walk round the Pass, and go down the Roman steps to Cwm-Bychan."

"Is it not rather far?" asked the Artist's Wife.

"Not for the young ones," chimed in her daughter, "and only young ones are going."

"Who is to chaperone you, then?" asked her mother, smilingly.

The Brown-eyed Girl flushed again. Then she said:

"Well, I think the Widow will drive up with us, and perhaps come in the brake which is to meet us this evening. The rest of the time we shall have just to look after ourselves."

"I will take care of her," put in the Medical, earnestly, "I assure you she will come to no harm."

"Well, then, I suppose we must let her go," said the Artist's Wife. She said it with a sigh, as though the words struck her as prophetic.

However, opinions were not at all agreed as to the advisability of undertaking so long an expedition on so doubtful a morning.

"Let us put it off till another day," proposed the

Old-Young Lady, with shrill eagerness. Though very punctilious as regards her recognition as one of the younger members of the circle, she was only too grateful when any kind Fate prevented any expedition she inwardly deemed too venturesome or fatiguing.

"What are the resources of the house in case of a wet day?" inquired the Widow's fat voice. She rather took upon herself the rôle of Mistress of the Ceremonies.

"A moth-eaten bagatelle-board," was the Parson's dry rejoinder.

"We might have charades," suggested the Bread-and-Butter Misses in a breath.

"How about tobogganing downstairs on trays?" came from the Boy.

"Oh-h-h-h!" from Mine Host, apprehensively. He was always hovering about intent to guard his Lares and Penates.

"There are dancing and cards, of course," said the Effective Girl, languidly, "but neither of those goes well with daylight. What do you suggest?" she added, turning to the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face.

"I intend going up Nantcol in any case."

"Then so shall I," she said in a low tone, with a smile and a sudden glint of green from her quickly shadowed eyes. It was very effective, and she knew it.

"I'm going," cried the Boy, eagerly, though the glint and smile had not been for him, and *he* knew it.

"Oh, Uncle, we can't be left out. Do say yes," cried the Bread-and-Butter Misses.

"The sun is breaking through," declared Ringlets, with more cunning than sincerity. The sandwiches were already cut, and she had no wish to alter her housekeeping arrangements.

Though no one else saw with certainty this natural phenomenon, it was evidently taken for granted, as an immediate move was made, and there was much discussion concerning stout boots, sticks, wraps, and all the manifold paraphernalia of a mountain excursion. Universal good humour seemed restored by magic.

Some of us never outgrow our childish dislike of the postponing of a picnic.

And after the expedition was fairly on its way up the self-same track the Little Teacher had explored on her very first morning, now seemingly so long ago, the sun really did break out, chasing long streamers of mistlike flying squadrons across the tender blue of the sky and athwart the rock-strewn, heather-crowned knolls; whilst the mountain peaks rose clear and high above the white mist billows.

"It will be very hot," volunteered the Old-Young Lady, wondering to herself whether she could invent some plausible reason why she, at any rate, should not climb those terrible altitudes already pointed out by the whip of the driver as the Pass.

"It's quite clear at the top, indeed, and you must bear straight away to the left. It's no trouble you'll be having, for it's the rocks that are marked,

since one party lost their way and spent the night on the hills, *indeed*!"

"Don't you think," said the Old-Young Lady, coaxingly, to the nearest Bread-and-Butter Miss, "it would be wiser not to venture so far with this mist about?"

But the Bread-and-Butter Miss didn't see it at all in the same light, *she* thought it would be "simply lovely to be benighted."

The Whitey-Brown Person, who had no reputation for youth at stake, had already confided to the Widow that she meant keeping her seat in the waggonette.

In truth, it seemed rather a venturesome undertaking when, the surroundings, such as could be seen amid the changing, shifting fog, having momentarily become wilder and more desolate, the driver at length pulled up his panting, steaming horses, and stated that this was as far as he could go.

"Take your way by the bridge and then keep up the stream. You'll not miss it," added he.

This last assurance was at any rate comforting to the little band of explorers left suddenly to their own devices in a strange land.

They stood a moment or so in rather a forlorn little group whilst the driver re-adjusted a strap, mounted his box, and turned his horses round. Then away with a gallant trot, trot, wise in their generation, even though it were a bygone one, went the Widow, the Parson, and the Whitey-Brown Person.

They were soon lost in the mist, though the clop, clop of the horses' hoofs could still be heard sounding cheerily suggestive of warmth and civilisation.

"We'd better be off," said the Boy. "Let me carry your cloak." This to the Effective Girl, by whose side he hopefully ranged himself.

She surrendered the cloak, but spoilt the Boy's simple plan by linking her arm in that of the Brown-eyed Girl, and feigning a sudden interest in the names of all the surrounding hills.

The Artist's daughter pointed out Y-Foel-wen, Rhinog-fach, and others. She was an adept, having known and loved her Wales since first she could lisp the hard-sounding Welsh names as easily as her mother tongue.

The path was narrow for three, impossible for four, so the poor Medical, already laden with sundry flasks and sandwich cases for various members of the party, now found himself obliged to follow with the Old-Young Lady, who had fixed upon him as the strongest of the party, to say nothing of being in possession of the best supply of provisions should "anything happen."

The Sandy Uncle, who always attached himself to one of the other sex on principle, had managed to secure the companionship of the Little Teacher. The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face brought up the rear with a rather over-awed Bread-and-Butter Miss on either hand.

In spite of palpable efforts at laughter and

conversation it was rather a cross and ill-satisfied party that after about an hour's climbing agreed to rest awhile on a large, flat rock.

A little refreshment was next proposed. This disposed of, behold, the sun had once more gained his way, the mist had fled down the valley, the path shone straight ahead, bordered by glittering grass and rushes, and the sound of numerous tiny streams fell like music on the ears.

Refreshed and cheered a start was again made. But—important fact—the party had re-sorted itself. For now the triumphant Effective Girl walked proudly, the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face at her side. The happy Medical followed with the Brown-eyed Girl. The Old-Young Lady had taken possession of the Sandy Uncle. The Bread-and-Butter Misses scrambled along, happy in each other's unembarrassing company; whilst the love-lorn Boy poured out his woes into the kindly ears of the Little Teacher. She was sorry for the Boy, and managed to make the necessary replies to his confidences without losing any of the pleasure afforded her by each dainty mountain floweret, each mist-hung, drooping fern. How rich, too, in amber, brown and madder was the peaty fore-ground, with the light-toned rugged path broken here and there with little stream-filled pools, leading the eye ever on and on through the warm, golden greys of the rising steeps to the clear sharp amethyst of the mountain peaks, beyond which was the pale, far blue of the sky.

"Is it not perfect?" escaped her lips at last.

This was not a very appropriate reply to: "the way that chap, who's old enough to be her father, always gets hold of her," which happened to be the poor Boy's latest remark.

But he, though young and suffering from calf-love, as sure a sign of coming manhood as the soft down on his upper lip, was a gentleman, and saw at once the mistake he was making.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I am afraid I'm boring you horribly. Please shut me up if I begin again—only you're so kind and all that. Do you know," he added, quickly, "you remind me a bit of my mother?"

Bless the dear Boy, he meant it for the greatest compliment on earth, and the Little Teacher knew it; only she had been feeling so young amongst the others, and now, a slight chill as of age seemed to dim the sunlight of her heart.

The Boy did not notice her change of expression; he went on talking of his mother and his home, and from these wandered to his school-exploits. Until in relating how Sandcombe Major beat Farmer all ends up at fives, he forgot he was a man and crossed in love, and became a boy again and was happy.

At last, after many rests and waits for stragglers, and some cheering on of laggards, the top of the Pass was reached. At the same time another band of mist, denser, darker, more impenetrable than before, had veiled the sun and with sure effacing finger was blotting out first the distant heights, then one by

one the nearer knolls, the rocks, the rushy tufts, till all was one white tideless sea, in the centre of which was huddled the little group of figures, their forms growing indistinct, their voices sounding thin and hollow; whilst all around them spread a great and unbroken stillness.

CHAPTER XIX

IN LOVE

THEY sat and looked at one another for a moment in silence. Dismay was on some faces, excitement in others. The Brown-eyed Girl alone looked pleased.

"An adventure at last," she cried, "a thing I have been longing for all my life." And she laughed.

No one followed her example, and the laugh itself died away in the ghostly mist—an uncanny thing, half-draped, mysterious.

"Well," said the Sandy Uncle, with an attempt at facetiousness, "Ladies and Gentlemen of the Climbing Committee, I propose to take the vote of the Meeting as to whether we stay where we are or——"

"Go somewhere else," interrupted the Boy.

"That is," he added, "if we can find anywhere to go in this d—— *delicious* fog."

"We shall never find the marked rocks," put in the Old-Young Lady, plaintively. Already she thought with regret of the now far-distant waggonette, and envied the Whitey-Brown Person's courage in boldly acknowledging herself no longer young.

"In all probability the mist will soon clear," remarked the Effective Girl. She was not unpleasantly excited as she sat in the centre of the group, drawing, under cover of the slight sense of danger, rather nearer than was absolutely necessary to the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face. Her mind was already busy with plans for turning this unexpected development to her own advantage.

"I know what I vote," came from the Medical, as he began loosening parcels and bringing out the contents of sundry packets, "I vote we go in for a little refreshment.

"Carried unanimously," said the Sandy Uncle.

Sandwiches and flasks were produced; tongues were loosened, and a semblance, at any rate, of cheerfulness was kept up.

But in external circumstances there was no lifting, the mist growing obstinately denser and more opaque. The air, too, felt chill, like the damp breath of a subterranean cavern.

Some of the party shivered beneath their wraps. Conversation languished.

"It seems to me we are not doing much good here," said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face at last. "In all likelihood this mist is only local, and if we were to retrace our steps cautiously we should doubtless come out of it lower down."

At this moment there was a perceptible movement in the mist drifting past their faces, and a visible lightening of its opaqueness not behind but before them.

"Don't you think it would be better to keep on?" then said the Medical. "You see, the trap is to wait for us the other side, and there would be no end of a bother if we failed to turn up."

He glanced at the Brown-eyed Girl beside him. His promise to her mother was fast assuming the sanctity of a vow.

"Yes," the girl at his side chimed in, "father meant going back with us, and he would be in an awful way if we did not appear at all."

"We are just as likely to get out of the mist going on as going back," came in the Old-Young Lady's plaintive tones. She dreaded having to face the long weary return journey without any prospect of the cheerful sight of horses and vehicle to comfort her tired limbs.

"I expect the way is pretty plain," volunteered the Boy.

"Plain as anything," said the Sandy Uncle, "and, anyhow, I've done it before."

At this there was a chorus of delight. It is said a drowning man will catch at a straw. The fact that the Sandy Uncle—as one of a guide-led party—had ten years previously succeeded in making the Pass from the Cwm-Bychan side, was certainly only a straw, and not a very seaworthy one at that; but such as it was the party grasped at it eagerly, and on the strength of it quite overruled the more prudent suggestion of the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, that it still would be wiser to go back.

No one would hear of it excepting the Little Teacher, who said quietly:

"It is usually safer to face the ills we know than to risk the unknown. In any case there is, I suppose, no danger, it is only a question of time till we hit the track."

But the Sandy Uncle, delighted at the turn affairs had taken, was already quite officially marshalling the rest.

"Keep close together," he said. "I will take the lead. Should any one get separated from the party he must immediately shout. Whilst the mist is so thick we had better halt now and again to ascertain we are all together."

"You are sure you know the way?" queried the Old-Young Lady, looking rather nervously at the dense, white pall, which again shut them in on all sides.

"Oh! make yourself quite easy on that score. It should bear sharply away to the left," said the Sandy Uncle, with assurance. "Now if all are ready we had better be off."

So he prepared for immediate departure, a Bread-and-Butter Miss hanging to either arm. They at any rate had no intention of losing the one and only guide.

The Medical was staunchly fulfilling his sacred trust; and the Brown-eyed Girl looked anything but unhappy as the moist chill air suffused her cheeks with soft pink and curled the little brown tendrils of her hair about her bright young eyes. Gazelle-

footed as she was, too, she did not disdain to accept the proffered hand of help.

Ah me! Love can make of a down-dropping clammy mist and a bare hillside a veritable Garden of Eden.

The radiant Boy had proudly offered the Effective Girl his help. She delayed, hoping for higher game. She challenged the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face in a laughing tone for assistance. He was bending down, altering his shoe-lace, and did not apparently hear her. The Effective Girl's brow grew dark.

At this moment the Old-Young Lady nervously inquired, "And who is to take care of poor me?"

The remark was obviously addressed to the Boy, who smiled politely, but fixed wistful eyes on the Effective Girl.

She had to make up her mind quickly; it would never do for *her* to be left without a cavalier. She remembered what the wisdom of ages has said about "a bird in the hand," and took the proffered arm with a light laugh and a look that raised the unhappy Boy to the seventh Heaven, as she gaily joined the party, which, with the Sandy Uncle for its nucleus, was already on the move.

"Oh! I left my satchel on the rock," exclaimed the Old-Young Lady's voice: "how stupid of me! and I don't want to lose it."

"I will get it," said the Little Teacher, ever prone to kindness. "It was lying in the cleft by that tuft of bell heather. I will go for it."

"Is this the pretty thing, the very pretty thing?" asked a voice from behind, and through the mist gaunt and straight loomed the form of the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, a green crocodile-skin bag depending from his outstretched hand.

The bag was passed to its owner, and the Little Teacher turned from her forestalled quest to find herself at the side of the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face.

"One moment," said he, as she was about to hasten after the others, whom the mist was already commencing to hide—"one moment. I think you and I were the only ones who did not quite agree with our sandy friend as to the wisdom of going forward. What do you say, even now, to the safe and prosaic plan of retracing our steps—just you and I together?"

The face was as wooden as ever, but the tone was almost a coaxing one. The Little Teacher felt her heart throb in an unwonted manner against her side. But with the very desire for that long tête-à-tête walk came also a fluttering, sickly feeling that it would be wiser, safer, to keep with the rest of the party.

"I think we had better follow the others," she said.

"As we have done all our lives," returned he, lightly. "Well, perhaps there is wisdom in it. Let us make a start."

So they started in the full and virtuous expectation of almost immediately overtaking the travellers whom the mist had already hidden from view. They walked

some few yards in silence; still the white wall was unbroken by sound or sight of human beings.

"We can't surely have missed them," said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face. "No, see," laying his hand on a rock to the right, on the surface of which a rough arrow was rudely daubed, "here is one of the marks the driver spoke of."

"But that points the way we have come," she objected.

"Possibly the painter came round the other way. Anyhow, we are in the track, and if we push on quickly are bound to overtake them soon."

Saying this, ostensibly to make her progress over the rough footway quicker, he took her hand. Neither wore gloves, and at the touch, all in a moment, her youth already gone, the Little Teacher entered into her heritage.

Love knocked at the door of her heart, that door on which before he had never so much as glanced; now he loudly knocked and, pushing wide, entered in, claiming the little virgin chamber, innocently white, as all his own.

A long delicious tremor started from the Little Teacher's finger-tips and tingled to her very heart. For a moment she herself and the man at her side were as unreal as the ghostly rocks in the white mist around them. Only for a moment. The next the great flood-tide of life and love returned. She glanced up at her companion.

His face was as wooden as ever; his dark, restless eyes were trying to pierce the gloom ahead.

"Suppose we shout?" was his commonplace suggestion.

But he still held her hand.

He shouted "Hullo!"

All silent.

Again and again "Hullo!"

Somewhere thick and muffled came the hoarse bleat of an asthmatic sheep. Then all more densely, palpably silent than before.

"It's a bit lonesome," said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face.

"I don't think so," said the Little Teacher. "To me there is something beautiful, new, wonderful, about this strange white mist."

There was in her quiet voice a ring of joy

The Man looked down at her; her grey eyes shone with a clear light; there was a soft shell-like pink in her cheeks.

"She is pretty, after all," thought he to himself, "a strange, elusive beauty, uncommon, not altogether of the earth. It seems as though those eyes were usually veiled, but sometimes for a moment the mind—or is it the soul?—looks out."

He had already drawn considerable satisfaction from watching for such moments.

Aloud he only said:

"You will get cold standing. I think we had better keep on. A sharp turn to the left was the direction issued, if I remember rightly, by our self-constituted guide." So they turned to the left.

The Little Teacher noted little and cared less

which way they went; for he still held her hand, and she was wondering and rejoicing over this strange new thing which had come into her life.

"I am in love, in love," she repeated, silently, to herself. So full of joy was she, she had not stopped to ask, "Is my love returned?"

It was enough as yet that she herself loved, that she, as it were in the eleventh hour, had reached the crowning glory and regal state of womanhood. "I love him, I love him," she thought.

She moved on silently through the mist as one in a dream of the dawning. The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face moved silently at her side.

CHAPTER XX

"THE MEAN LITTLE THING"

WHILE the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face and the Little Teacher wandered off hand-in-hand into a world of dreams, what had become of the rest of the party?

Following the Sandy Uncle, devoutly trusting, as is the manner of mankind, any one who takes upon himself the *rôle* of leader, they stepped bravely out into the mist, laughing and talking and cheering one another with the well-worn proverbs and silly little jokes that pass on such occasions for wit.

The path seemed fairly level for a time, barring loose stones and unexpected little hollows full of water; then it suddenly and very evidently turned to the right and commenced going downhill.

"Hullo, leader!" sang out the Medical, "is this all right? I thought you said 'to the left.'"

The Sandy Uncle halted and looked round in rather a bewildered way.

"Haven't we turned to the left?" he questioned.

"Certainly not," every one agreed.

"We haven't seen anything of those marked rocks," remarked the Old-Young Lady, in a woe-begone

voice. She failed to see the fun of the thing; her feet were wet through, her fringe was hanging in limp wisps about her face; she was painfully conscious that the tip of her nose was of the colour of beetroot; she wished most heartily she had stayed at home.

"Are we all here?" asked the Effective Girl, suddenly. With a spasm of jealousy she had noted that two of the party were missing.

There was a hasty muster.

The Old-Young Lady, the Sandy Uncle, the Bread-and-Butter Misses, the Medical, the Brown-eyed Girl, the Effective Girl and the Boy, all answered to their names, but the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face and the Little Teacher, where were they?

"Ask of the winds——" began the Medical.

"I only wish there were some wind to clear this wretched mist," interrupted the Sandy Uncle, disconsolately.

He had rather fancied himself as guide; but now, as the Boy remarked to his companion, the office was for sale, cheap, to any one who liked to undertake it.

"Hadn't we better shout?" suggested the Medical.

So they shouted.

Clear and gruff, weak and strong, the voices mingled, and were swallowed up in the thick atmosphere around.

No answer came, but somewhere out of the unknown a raven croaked once, twice. It had an eerie sound.

"Enough to give one the blues," said the Boy to the Effective Girl.

For answer she tucked her arm more closely in his and looked up into his eyes with an unspoken, 'Who cares when we are together?'"

She had practised that look so often it was quite easy to manage even whilst her thoughts were elsewhere. Just now they were away in the cold clammy mist where *those two* were somewhere together.

How she hated that little sly thing with her demure ways and her cunning plots! But all the while she smiled on the Boy.

And the Old-Young Lady kept standing first on one cold, wet foot, then on the other, asking plaintively:

"Can't anybody suggest anything? Can't anybody suggest anything?"

"Like a draggled old parrot that has been out in the rain," remarked the Effective Girl, spitefully. The Boy laughed, and thought her very clever, though it was quite against his original nature to take pleasure in another's woes, or laugh at anything old and in trouble.

Perhaps he was not the first boy the Effective Girl had pushed ever so little out of the right and manly way.

But the Sandy Uncle was speaking, and already his voice had lost something of its confident ring.

"I propose we retrace our footsteps a little and then bear more decidedly to the left," said he.

The rest agreed, not with much hope this time, only no one else suggested anything, and to retrace one's steps was at any rate one degree better than standing helplessly waiting for the lifting of a fog, which seemed quite incapable of doing anything so kindly.

So in a dreary sort of follow-my-leader fashion, back they splashed and stumbled.

"Now to the left," directed the Sandy Uncle, trying to put some little certainty into his voice.

To the left it was.

"You are not tired," murmured the Medical.

"Not in the least. And you?"

"I should like to go on like this for ever."

For pure precautionary reasons and simply because he had promised her mother to take good care of her, the honest fellow had now projected a strong arm under the Brown-eyed Girl's cloak and about her supple waist. He could support her better so, doubtless; and she did not seem to mind.

After some further more or less steady tramping the path seemed suddenly barred by a huge rock.

"Ha!" exclaimed the Sandy Uncle, triumphantly, "here we are, now we shall find the mark——" Then his voice suddenly changed. His eye had lighted on an empty sandwich-paper, a discarded crust, a half-smoked cigarette.

"By all that's——! It's the very rock we lunched at more than an hour ago."

"We have wandered in a circle," volunteered the Brown-eyed Girl.

The rest of the party received the announcement in gloomy silence.

Only the Old-Young Lady sat down on the clammy rock and burst into tears.

"For goodness' sake stop that!" sneered the Effective Girl. "Surely there's water enough and to spare without tears!"

The Brown-eyed Girl had left the warmth and security of her own position to comfort the unfortunate companionless one.

"Never mind," she said; "don't you see we are better off really because we are now in the right path, and can go back if we like?"

"Let's go back, let's go back," moaned the unhappy one on the rock, "and I'll never come climbing again."

"Let's go back."

"By Jove, just my own opinion!"

"Bound to get down that way."

"That hard-faced old Johnnie knew a thing or two. Bless'd if he isn't down in the valley before a hot fire by this time."

"You think they went back?" The Effective Girl's voice was ominously shrill.

"Not a doubt about it."

"And quite right too."

"*The mean little thing!*"

Perhaps no one quite understood this last remark. At any rate no one challenged it.

Weary, dispirited, crestfallen, hesitating at times, at times even losing the track and painfully regaining

it, the little party crept slowly down the rugged path, up which they had so hopefully advanced in the early morning hours. How long a way it now seemed! Surely they had missed it again! No! the fog was a little thinner now, and from time to time they recognised some landmark noted in the upward journey—the gate which had fallen from its hinges—the stream where one had drunk—the cleft where another had gathered black spleenwort.

As the descent proceeded the clammy air about them grew less dense, but to balance this advantage it now commenced to rain.

The Sandy Uncle, who was a good fellow at heart, and had already bitterly repented his attempt at leadership, now plodded humbly in the rear, supporting the limp and dishevelled form of the Old-Young Lady. To all her feeble complaints and reiterated grumbles he returned with unfailing cheerfulness:

"A nice hot cup of tea—that's what you want, and you shall have it, too, at the very first farm we reach."

The Effective Girl now led the way, and her voice mingled with the Boy's clear tones in rather stagey jest and laughter; whilst all the while a creeping mist, denser than any in the outer world around, was filling her heart with jealous hate.

"The mean, cunning little thing," she thought to herself, "to slip off with him like that! But she needn't think to win him; she is old and plain, and badly dressed." Her own face looked old and plain as the thought passed through her mind; but she

did not know it; and the rapt Boy did not see it, for the Fata Morgana of calf-love had blinded his eyes, and the girl at his side could work with him as she would.

The Brown-eyed Girl was troubled about her people. Would they be very anxious? she wondered. And the Medical reassured her and felt very strong and protective and manly, and she clung to him just a little, and they were both very happy.

The Bread-and-Butter Misses chattered to one another, and said what fun it would be to tell their friends about it all, and what a splendid adventure it was for their diaries; they had both started one from the moment they reached Pen-y-gwyn.

At length the worst of the weary journey was over, and eight forlorn travellers stood knocking at the closed door of a lonely farm. The mist was clearing in these lower regions, but the rain was coming down in torrents, and as they waited for answering footsteps to their knock, they could hear it spluttering and gurgling from rain-gutters innumerable on to the slaty slabs below.

Before long the door was opened by a sturdy Welsh figure, with short skirts and ample bosom. She took in the situation at a glance.

"And it's losing your way you've been, and it's not hard in the weather this day. Come in, come in, all of you. Never mind me floor, that'll wash, and it's glad I am I've a good fire and me baking, and I'll have tea for you in no time."

Never was sight more welcome to weary, way-worn

folk than that cheerful old farmhouse kitchen, with the firelight shining on pewter and copper, and reflected more dully in the polish of ancient oak.

How quickly their spirits rose as they blinked their wet eyelashes in the ruddy light, and shook caps and coats, and spattered the slate floor with glistening drops soon to be dried by the royal heat of the glowing peat on the wide hearth! And what an appetising smell of newly baked bread! And the taste of it a little later with home-grown heather honey, and blackberry jam and quaint old Welsh cups of steaming tea!

It was not till the meal was nearly through that the Sandy Uncle remembered the missing links of his party.

The Effective Girl had thought of them all along; but she was not going to say anything.

"Those two, eh!" said the Sandy Uncle, with a crisp, well-buttered crust poised betwixt plate and mouth. "They may have been here. We'll ask."

But the good dame, sitting now in her ample, high-backed chair by the fire, her fingers busy with a half-knitted coarse grey stocking, the while her eyes beamed on her guests, had seen no one answering to the description given. Nobody had been to the farm at all.

"But likely they'll have passed us in the mist," added she, which seemed highly probable.

Tea over, and notwithstanding the good wife's protests, liberally paid for, a nondescript vehicle, half cart, half gig, drawn by a big rough horse,

locally known as "the pony," was pressed into the service. In it the giggling Bread-and-Butter Misses and the damply cheerful Old-Young Lady were safely bestowed. The Effective and Brown-eyed Girls, each for reasons of her own, went on foot.

So, some bumped and shaken, some walking alone and some close together, the rain having now ceased and a clear lambent sunset shining in the far west, all at last arrived safely at Pen-y-gwyn.

CHAPTER XXI

"ALL BUT TWO"

AT Pen-y-gwyn there was excitement, trouble, and dismay when it was found that this mud-bedraggled, battered, but cheery looking crew represented only a portion of the missing party.

The Widow, rosy from a fire, her cap and lappets looking accusingly clean and fresh to the way-worn travellers, emerged from the drawing-room.

"The brake started long ago to meet you, and was to pick you all up at Cwm-Bychan at five o'clock," she said.

"It is half-past seven now," put in Ringlets, rapidly. "Those who are in had better have dinner."

"But suppose they are waiting for us still?" objected the Brown-eyed Girl, rather anxiously.

"They would guess when the mist came on that we should come back the same way," asserted the Effective Girl, rather coolly, as she mounted the stairs. She was anxious to remove all signs of dishevelment as quickly as possible. She smiled back at the Boy as she went.

At this juncture the Sandy Uncle, who could not,

as sometime leader, quite get rid of a feeling of responsibility, inquired, in as off-hand a way as he could muster, whether the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face and the Little Teacher had safely returned.

"We missed them in the mist," he added, with an attempt at facetiousness.

"Oh-h-h-h!" said Mine Host.

"We made sure they would have found their way home," remarked the Medical, easily; "perhaps after all they hit the right track."

"And are waiting for us at Cwm-Bychan," suggested the Brown-eyed Girl.

"I tell you what," said the Medical, "it's clear now, I'll get my bike and run up to the lake and let them know we're all right, and make sure about those two."

"I'm with you," said the Boy, always obliging when not under his Circe's eye.

"But you are both so wet," objected the Sandy Uncle, not without a little twinge of conscience. He also possessed a bicycle, but a savoury smell floated from the kitchen regions. He sniffed it and he fell.

"We shan't hurt on the move," said the Boy, valiantly.

"There's your dinner, though," put in Ringlets, the temptress.

"We shall enjoy that all the more when we get back."

"You may meet them half-way," came in cheerful tones from the Brown-eyed Girl, as she followed the

rest of the feminine element upstairs. She was extremely glad of the Medical's kind proposal, her affectionate heart having been sorely smitten at the thought of her people awaiting her coming, growing hourly more and more anxious, whilst she all the while would be warm and dry, enjoying a good dinner, and cheerfully discussing the adventures of the day.

The bicycles were brought round, and the two young fellows swung into saddle and off.

They met the Artist and his Wife about half a mile from home, and were able to entirely remove their natural anxiety about their daughter. They gathered from them that nothing had been seen or heard of the missing two, and that the driver was still waiting with the carriage for the expected arrival of the whole party.

"We came to the conclusion at last," said the Artist's Wife, "that the mist had driven you back, though it can hardly have been as dense with us as with you. We sheltered in the farmhouse during the rain, and then, as no persuasion would induce the driver to move, we set out on foot."

The Artist himself said nothing. He had taken the opportunity of the halt to light his pipe, and his face as it glowed in the light of the match showed great contentment. He had "bagged" his effect before the rain began.

"I hope those two are all right," said his wife, rather anxiously.

"Followed the others down no doubt, and are

safely in by this time," remarked her spouse, between satisfied puffs at his pipe.

Calling a cheery "Good-bye," the young men went on till they reached the farm, and there took council of the driver. The latter was not at all put out by the long delay. Nothing suits a Welshman better than to wait.

"And you'll be thinking the party have gone down the other way, indeed?" he said, slowly, picking a bit of straw off his coat.

"We know they did," said the Medical, rather impatiently, "because we happened to be with them."

"They'll be home by now, I'm thinking."

"Long ago—all but two."

"All *but* two. Then I'll just wait here some longer for those two. What time is it likely they'll be here now?"

He slowly drew out a cumbrous watch.

"Time, man! How can I tell when they'll be here, or whether they'll get here at all?"

"You see, they may have gone down the other side," explained the Boy.

"The other side!" cried the driver, roused at last, "then I'd best be off at once, or I'll never get round there before dark."

"But we don't know which way they *are* coming."

"Then I think we'll just be getting home," said the driver, apparently ready to move at last; "the gentlemen will, perhaps, be walking all of the way."

"But one of them is a lady!"

"Oh! One of the gentlemen is a lady!"

The honest fellow was plainly puzzled.

"We lost them in the mist, you know." This from the Boy.

The words "lost" and "mist" evidently penetrated the Welshman's somewhat dense understanding. He turned his gaze to where a thick white curtain still swathed all the upper part of Craig-y-Saeth; whilst the lower stretches of the mountain were now smiling in the last rays of the setting sun.

An anxious look came over the weather-beaten visage in its entanglement of ruddy black beard.

"Two gentlemans and one of them a lady—left up yonder in the mist." A pause and then—"I'm thinking they'll not be getting down to-night by Cwm-Bychan *or* Cwm-Nantcol."

"Oh, look here," said the Medical, hurriedly, "you don't think there's any danger, or that sort of thing, do you?"

The Boy's fresh-coloured cheeks paled a little. Earlier in the day he had called the missing man "a hard-faced old Johnnie," but now he owned to himself that "the chap was a decent sort"; and the Little Teacher had been "no end kind to a fellow." He did not like to think of what might possibly be lying at that moment up there amongst those shrouded peaks.

The driver's next remark did not tend to make his hearers more easy in their minds, for he went on to say, "There's shepherds and such gone over the edge before now in the mist, and sheeps often does.

And neither of the gentlemens knowing the track! Dear! Pity!"

He called something in Welsh to the farm-woman who had come to the open door and was watching the two hot-looking young gentlemen leaning on their mud-splashed bicycles and talking so earnestly to the driver. In answer to the latter's call she came forward, and a long colloquy ensued in vehement Welsh.

As the upshot of this the good woman at length retired, and the driver came back to the Medical and the Boy. Their minds, it must be owned, had already dismissed the absent two as "safe back by now, ten to one," and were dwelling somewhat fondly on the hoped-for joys of dining.

Farewell all such pleasant visions. The driver seemed quite excited.

"She *had* gone to get her son and the farm-lad. They will bring ropes and come with you. There *was* a gentleman lost on the mountain last year, she say, and when they found him he had broke his leg. She was saying, she is very sorry for you. I would go myself indeed, but am lame of the leg. Besides, there is the horses."

The Medical and the Boy looked at one another blankly. A nice prospect, stumbling about in that ghastly mist all night perhaps, and dinnerless, to boot.

"I bet they're back by now," said the Medical, irresolutely. "Yet if they're not——"

He looked up the Pass.

The mist had crept a little lower; the light had died from the mountain side, leaving it an inky grey.

"I think we'll have to go, old man," he said.

"I'm game," said the Boy, "only I vote we grub first."

So the bicycles were lifted into the brake.

"There's no telling whether we shall ever want them again," said the Medical, with an attempt at a laugh which fell flat. The driver was instructed to deliver these at Pen-y-gwyn with a note which the Medical wrote hastily with his stylo on the back of an envelope. "Just to let them know what we are up to, in case they have to come and look for *us*," he said.

Then, while the farmer and his lad were trying to persuade an ancient horn lantern that its purpose in life was to emit a light instead of an exceeding great and potent stench, which at present seemed its mistaken function, the two young fellows contrived to build up the inner man so abundantly on bread and cheese that their spirits rose amazingly. By the time they were once more on the road they had forgotten their fatigue and were looking on the whole thing as a lively adventure which was bound to end well somehow.

"Feeling fit?" queried the Medical, as he lit a cigarette and passed on the match to the Boy.

"As a fiddler," returned the latter, stepping out bravely, despite the fact that he could feel the water squelching in his boots.

The farmer and his lad apparently "had little English," they only answered in monosyllables when addressed, and, having accepted some tobacco, seemed to prefer walking a few paces in advance, one carrying the lantern, the other a coil of rope. The only sounds that came from them were the creaking of their cord breeches and the stamping of their heavy boots on the stony track. The Medical and the Boy followed, talking cheerfully of many things.

As they went the sky above them grew darker and the mist came down and down till everything but their immediate surroundings was swallowed up, and the dull blur of the horn lantern was but dimly seen ahead.

But that, as the Boy remarked, was of no consequence.

"For," said he, "there is not the slightest fear but that we shall be able to follow, blood-hound fashion, by the scent alone."

CHAPTER XXII

"PERHAPS THE WORLD WILL END TO-NIGHT"

AND what of those other two, missing and mist-enwrapped?

After leaving the arrow-marked rock and turning sharply, as they supposed, to the left, they soon found themselves with no path underfoot, but marshy, rush-tufted ground, with great soft sponges of bog-moss, which sank away under their tread, leaving in their place little pools of black peaty water which was of a penetrating coldness and emitted a stagnant and seaweedy odour.

"I'm afraid we've missed it," said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, relinquishing in his companion's favour a slightly drier knot of coarse grass on which by good luck he had found himself standing. "We had better shout again."

He lifted up his voice, deep, resonant as a bell. This time not even a sheep gave answer. All around them was thick, dead silence.

It was eerie. The Little Teacher shivered.

"Are you cold?" asked her companion, anxiously.

She smiled as she gave an answer in the negative.

It struck her as strange, though sweet, that any one should mind whether she were cold or not. Perhaps, though, it was only courtesy that prompted the inquiry. She glanced up at the face beside her. It was hard, immovable as ever.

The Little Teacher sighed, she knew not why.

"You *are* cold, or tired at any rate," said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face. He drew the wraps closer round the little figure, and his eyes met hers. The look that was in them, or the touch of his fingers on her neck, sent strange delicious tremors through her body.

She made no answer this time to his remark, she had no time for mere words, she could hardly even think, for the almost too rapid beating of her heart, which sounded so loudly through her brain. Was this love—this choking, painful, yet deliciously sweet sensation that was making her tremble in every limb?

She forgot her age, remembered no longer that contempt for self which had grown up in long neglected years, making her count herself as unnoticeable, plain and old.

She was not unnoticeable since "he" had deigned to notice her; not plain since "he" had looked upon her; nor old, for love makes all things young.

In the ecstasy of the present she gave no heed to the future, hardly troubled herself as to whether "he" too loved; the outpouring of the flood of love so long pent up in her poor little heart was all-sufficient as yet. It was enough that *she* loved.

As they passed slowly on through the mist,—for he had decided it was better at any rate to keep moving,—there might have been golden sunshine around and bright flowers, and the singing of birds, for all the Little Teacher noticed of her surroundings. It was enough just to be by *his* side. Suddenly there came back to her consciousness an old story read years before, she knew not where. It was of a lover about to be parted for ever from his lady. He begged with her one last ride, and as they rode the refrain in his heart was, "Perhaps the world may end to-night." At last in her absorption she said it aloud.

The spoken words recalled the realities of life, and she with shame immediately wished them unsaid; for what belike had she not betrayed—she, the staid Little Teacher, who had slipped through life so far so respectably, though as she now knew, so uneventfully and so joylessly? How much of her heart might she not have shown to this man by her side, this wooden-faced man of whom she knew absolutely nothing, save, and was not that enough? that she loved him! But he, her quiet companion, tramping on stiff and straight through the fog and gloom, took up her words as though they were the merest commonplace of daily life.

"And what if the world should end to-night?" he said. "Should we miss very much, I wonder? I, for my part, should not greatly care; I have lived as hard and as fully as most men; I have seen more of this old world than most; suffered a good deal,

rejoiced not a little. Yes, should the world end to-night, I think I have had my share."

"And I," said the Little Teacher—the contrast between his full past and her little scroll of empty years was suddenly so great,—"and *I* should have had *nothing*."

It was like a cry forced from her heart.

"How nothing?" queried the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face. His voice was low and caressing.

And then in the midst of the cold, cruel fog, the kind protecting fog that shut them in, those two, apart from all the world, she told him her poor little empty story, just the facts, plain, unvarnished. As she spoke, all the haunting mystery, the vague suggestions of an interesting past, that the Man had woven round his quaint little companion, vanished. He sighed. Her tale was so very commonplace.

He glanced down at the little face beside him, eager now, flushed with excitement at this, the first confidence of her life. A great pity filled the strong man for this frail soul, so unfitted, it seemed to him, to face life's battle, and yet which had stood up so bravely bearing onslaught after onslaught of the grim legions of poverty.

"Good God," he thought, "she has perhaps at times not even had enough to eat." He drew her arm closer through his. The poor, fragile, dauntless little body.

So this, the pitifully commonplace one of poverty, was after all her only secret.

Her tale done, they were silent for awhile, the silence that draws souls nearer than speech.

Then he said, tenderly:

"Your holiday over, you will have to go back to all this?"

"Don't remind me of it," she cried, and there was a sound as of tears in her voice. "When the time comes I shall perhaps find strength, but I dare not think of it now." Then, with a little quiver in her voice, "Perhaps the world may end to-night."

As she spoke, back to her mind came other words of his, "There is always the quiet pool."

At this moment, treading on a moving stone, she slipped and would have fallen had not her companion held her up. How sweet it was to feel his strong supporting arm; yet some maidenly instinct impelled her to withdraw herself from too close a contact. Did he read something in her instinctive movement? It would be hard to say, for his next words told nothing.

"It strikes me we are doing no good tramping along like this from nowhere to nowhere. If we could but find a stream now!"

"A stream!" exclaimed the Little Teacher, brought back to earth by his everyday tone, "whatever would be the use of that? We are drenched enough, in all conscience."

For the rain, which had at first been hardly more than wet in the mist, was now settling into a steady downpour more wetting than any thunder shower.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face smiled.

"Now there is the child again," he said; "don't you know that streams run downhill, little girl?

and had we one to follow we could get down into a valley; and in valleys are farms, and in farms are fires for wet folk, and hot tea, and all things desirable. I have been on the look-out for a stream for a long time, but so far it seems a case of 'water, water everywhere, and not a—' single stream. What do you say to sitting in the hollow of this rock, and waiting in the hope the rain will bring the mist down?"

"Are we lost?" inquired the Little Teacher.

"Lost, well, not exactly. I should say it is the path that is lost. What do you think?"

"I don't see how we can be lost," said she, "when——"

"When what?"

But the Little Teacher made no answer, and the Man occupied himself in finding the least uncomfortable spot in which to ensconce her, and afterwards in lighting a cigar for himself. He offered his companion a cigarette, and laughed at the shocked face with which she declined.

"Shocked," he said, with mocking eyes; "why, my little friend, you are twenty years behind the times."

"I know I am," she replied, with some spirit, "because I have lost just twenty years of my life."

"What would you do with those years could they return to you unlost?"

The Little Teacher thought for a moment before she said gravely:

"Live them all through just the same, I suppose."

"But why?"

"The selfsame reason would oblige me, because I should have no means to do otherwise."

"Oh, does it not seem hard," she went on, with sudden energy, "that just for lack of so paltry a thing as money, I and hundreds more, for I am not so stupid as to suppose I am the only one, should spend our lives simply in keeping alive? What is the good of it? The world is all around us full of beautiful things—we see none of them. It is full of good things—none fall to our share. It is full of laughter—none of it is for *us*. It is full of music—but it passes *us* by. Men pity the widows, those overwhelmed with great losses, the maimed, the bereaved. All these are not really so greatly to be pitied; they have had their share; but *we* have never had anything."

Her voice as it died away was infinitely pathetic.

The Man at her side was experiencing a strange feeling; a warm tide of pity was loosing in him a comprehension of what Life must be to those to whom she gives nothing but bare existence.

He said to himself that it was a new sensation, and he liked new sensations.

Sometimes, on rare occasions, we do ourselves an injustice, and his heart may not, after all, have been as wooden as his face.

At any rate his voice—he had such a flexible voice—was tender as he said:

"In your case it is not yet too late. Even now you may be called upon to feast at Life's banquet."

Then in an altered tone:

"But I must not let you get cold with sitting. Shall we try moving once more?"

So they rose and went on.

In her altered mood the Little Teacher began to feel very pitiful for herself; she was conscious of her wet and flapping skirt, her soaked boots, and even an unromantically sinking sensation within which proclaimed the dinner-hour long since gone by.

They walked some time in silence, cautiously at first, then by degrees in a dogged persistent sort of way that took scant heed of the nature of the ground they were traversing. With gentle consideration for his companion's evidently growing fatigue, the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face took the conversation on himself, and was just in the midst of a racy account of a night alarm of fire in a big hotel on the Riviera, when, suddenly, without any warning, the ground, as it seemed, shot away beneath their feet. He had just time to throw his arms round the Little Teacher, who was slightly in advance, and draw her forcibly back, when dully through the mist came the rumbling sound of falling stones, growing fainter and more hollow in the distance until it died away and the silence closed in, seemingly more absolute than before.

For a moment they gazed at one another. The colour had left her lips, and beads of perspiration stood on his brow.

"Perhaps the world may end to-night," she said, dreamily, at last.

Her voice broke the spell.

"It was very near being that for both of us, my

little friend. I did not hurt you, did I? There was no time to be careful."

"You saved my life," she answered, with dewy eyes.

"And on the whole it was worth saving?" he questioned.

The Little Teacher looked away, trying to pierce the mist whence those dread sounds had come.

"We are on the edge of a precipice," she said, with a shudder. "We cannot go on! Can we go back?"

"It is not possible to go on. It is not safe to go back," he answered. "We must just stay where we are."

Even as he spoke the mist in front of them rifted for a moment. They saw straight as it seemed below them the black depths of a far-off lake; halfway between it and them some sinister slaty crags; beyond the lake a green valley, far, far off, with one tiny farm, and a line, no thicker than a hair, which was a road. One moment only they saw it, then the mist swept back again and all was gone.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face took off his cap, and his still face was more set than usual for a moment, then he said:

"'Twas a near thing, my little friend." Then after a pause: "My life seems well worth having at the present moment, so with your consent I think we will sit us down just here and play at patience."

The words were light, but the Little Teacher, having noticed the silent lifting of the cap, deemed, and rightly deemed, the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face was not unthankful.

CHAPTER XXIII

A STRANGE POSITION TO BE IN

TIME went slowly by, and the obstinate mist still held its sway. Once for the space of a few seconds a rosy flush passed through it like a sudden quickening to life; a moment later and it was gone, and the cold shroud around them grew greyer, more wan and corpselike than before. Before long it became quite dark.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face lit a match and looked at his watch.

"Nine o'clock," he said, "and still raining. Unless this clears soon, it strikes me we shall have to do something desperate in the hope of getting shelter for the night; but what with a precipice in front and a bottomless bog behind, it is rather a case of "'twixt the Devil and the deep sea."

"Why not stay here?" said the Little Teacher. "We are at least safe, and no wetter than we should be elsewhere."

There certainly seemed some sense in this remark, and the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face owned to himself that what with fatigue and the sinking sensation below the breast-bone, which a succession of cigarettes

had totally failed to alleviate, the idea of moving was fast becoming distasteful to him.

So they sat on, talking in a desultory manner of many things. That is to say, he talked, and she put in a word now and again at longer and longer intervals. Presently it occurred to him that it was some time since she had made any reply. He lit a match, for now the darkness was of inky blackness. Her head had drooped back on to the rock with a child-like abandonment to fatigue. She was fast asleep.

"Poor little thing," he said, softly, "what a beastly hard pillow!" He moved her head gently till it rested on his shoulder. Her eyelids quivered, and she gave a little satisfied sigh, but she slept on.

"This is a strange position to be in," thought the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face. "If she were younger now, more beautiful."

He tried to picture the present situation with the Little Teacher's place filled by one or another of certain beauteous forms that slipped from the treasures of his memory; but none seemed to satisfy him to-night. He found his thoughts instead dwelling on the little creature beside him, whose breath he could hear low and even on the great stillness all around.

The rain had now ceased, and there was not the tiniest sound, no breath of wind, no distant tinkling stream to break the dense, palpable quiet; not a single ray of light to pierce even dimly the gloom.

The Man, the only waking, thinking creature

doubtless for miles round, motionless lest he should wake the tired sleeper at his side, let his fancy play about the little story she had told him so simply an hour or two before.

He pictured her girlhood's home, filled with every refinement and comfort, her mother still beautiful, stately, silver-haired ; her father, a devilish good fellow, just a trifle too fond, perhaps, of an after-dinner glass. He pictured her daintily clad, with a cloud of burnished hair about her elfin face (she must have been very pretty in those far-off days, he thought) ; he even provided her with a lover, a taking young fellow enough, but with no grit in him, or else there had not been that tale of twenty years. For she, who up to that moment had never known sorrow or care, had been clothed like the lilies and fed like the birds, had suddenly been obliged to stand up and face the footlights ; had had to confront the awful problem of how to make a living ; not an easy one for any woman though made of hard, stern stuff, but for a fragile child like that! And had she gone under? Not a bit of it. For twenty years she had stood by the helm and kept her little ship afloat—and steered straight too, he'd take his oath on that.

Twenty years.

He looked back on his own record. He'd gone the pace and had a rattling good time with the rest. Then he'd sickened of men and cities and had gone off into lone deserts, over far mountains. He'd held his life in his hand many a time, had faced death by drowning, by starvation, by fire, in open fight,

by treachery, and yet it seemed to him now that the courage that could face calmly and simply, day by day, year by year, loneliness, poverty, and deadly dulness, had in it something of a finer quality than any to which he could lay claim.

Good God, what temptations she must have had! And he shuddered, knowing nothing of the mystic efficacy of the neat tailor-made and the tightly braided hair.

It seemed horrible to him that after even this poor glimpse of better things that staunch little soul should have to return once more to the dreary London attic and the sordid life which would appear so doubly sordid now. He began to picture what her life might be even yet, if some good fellow—he would have to be a real good sort—were to see her, pity her, and from pitying love her.

Surrounded once more by warmth and ease, how the little thing would bloom and expand like a flower in April when the sun shines and the chill March winds have fled. He felt he would like to be there to see the little wistful face grow less wistful. (What haunting eyes the sprite had to be sure!) Her mind, too, more starved even than her body, what joy it would be to watch the unfolding of the intelligence now lying dormant, pinched by poverty and a narrow daily round. Then travel! What a delight it would be to see her cheeks flush and her eyes glow as she saw for the first time Rome, the Matterhorn, or the Bride of the Sea! What a new interest would be her naïve remarks on all she saw—

nothing old, stale, used-up for her, all fresh, delightful, God-sent!

Yes, he mused, as he slowly knocked the ash off his very last cigarette, all this would be well worth seeing, and he was not sure but what that mythical fellow would get quite his share of the bargain, only he must be a really decent chap—none other would do.

Musing thus, his thoughts grew vague and more misty; his head sank forward on his breast; the stillness all round was very great; and he, too, slept.

CHAPTER XXIV

"DR. LIVINGSTONE, I BELIEVE"

HE may have slept for hours or for a few minutes only; but he awoke with a sudden alertness and a feeling that some one had called him by his name.

He looked up and around with amaze. For behold, in the minutes or the hours of his sleep the fog had "folded its tent like the Arabs and as silently stolen away."

Above were the jewelled blue-black depths of the summer-night sky. Sheer below were the precipitous crags of the mountain side; around and behind were slaty rocks in fantastic shapes and positions as though some bygone race of giants had piled them in frolicsome confusion.

By his side the Little Teacher slept peacefully, a light breeze stirred the damp tendrils of her loosened hair. And surely he was not mistaken in supposing that same breeze brought from somewhere far-off a faintly repeated cry. 'Twas this doubtless that had passed his outer ear and had reached where Consciousness was nodding on her throne.

There it was again borne down the wind. Was it a distant "Hullo!" or only the call of a wandering sheep to its fellows?

He listened intently. He could hear the beating of his own heart, but all else was still.

He had just concluded that fancy had played him false when again, thrice-repeated, distinct though faint, came the call.

With careful consideration he gently but hastily slipped the little resting head back on to its rocky pillow. Then, and not till then "Wake up," he cried, "they are looking for us."

Then, standing erect, he lifted his voice in a long "Hullo!" It sounded husky at first, and thick with fog; but the third attempt rang clear and true and echoed among the mountain peaks, and was caught up and tossed backwards and forwards again and again.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face was not in the mood to appreciate echoes just then, and he said some very naughty things below his breath until those mocking calls had sunk into silence and given him a chance to listen for a genuine human answer.

There it came, faint but clear, and he was able now to tell the direction of the sound.

The Little Teacher meanwhile had regained consciousness.

"I'm afraid I've been asleep," she said apologetically, and then quite composedly, "Has the fog lifted?"

"Hullo! Hullo!" rang out the clear voice of her companion.

"Hullo! Hullo-o-o-o-o-o!" rang back a hundred echoes.

"They are calling to us," said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, and the Little Teacher had never seen that face look less wooden.

"Hark! did you hear that?"

The Little Teacher did hear it. Not an echo this time, for "Where are you?" came faintly but distinctly, twice repeated.

"This way. Come on," said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face; "we can see where we are going now, and, by Jove, how hungry I am!"

The Little Teacher was so stiff at first she could hardly stand. Soon, however, by leaning on the strong arm proffered her, she was able to make some way in the direction of the shouts every moment growing more distinct.

By the help of the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, it was not long before she stood on the crest of the hill, for they found they had made a considerable descent in the darkness. The top gained, they looked to right and left. A purple-black expanse of dimly seen moor lay before them, with here and there upstanding rocks like ghostly presences in the silent night. Above them the dark blue immensity and the hosts of watching stars.

Suddenly it seemed to the Little Teacher as though one of those stars had lost its way and come to earth. There certainly was a bright

light shining in some unaccountable way in the midst of the velvety blackness, that stood for mountain, marsh and moor.

"Is it a will-o'-the-wisp?" she cried, as the light began to hover and flit from side to side.

"Where?" asked the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face.

"There, just in a line with that tall black thing to the left."

The Man gazed a moment, and then sent a great shout of "Ship ahoy!" echoing across the dusky rise.

"It's a lantern," he said. "You listen if the answer does not come from over there."

"Ahoy! Ahoy!" came faintly back, and the fallen star, the will-o'-the-wisp, or rather the strong-smelling but triumphant old horn lantern, was waved repeatedly to and fro.

"They're signalling," said the Little Teacher, excitedly. "Do you think they can see us?"

"No, but we can see them, and that's good enough," answered the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, as he began to guide her steps with such haste as the broken nature of the ground would allow towards the guiding light, every now and again lifting up his voice to let the search-party know their whereabouts.

"It would be too bad to see the light grow smaller and disappear in the distance, when we are so near salvation," he said.

"I think even then we could find our way down

now the mist has cleared," replied the Little Teacher, sedately.

"I believe we could find our way out of anything so long as we stuck together," said he. There was a glad ring in his voice, but it was too dark for her to see more than the dim wooden outline of his face.

With cheerful hearts but stumbling steps they watched the light grow ever larger, brighter, until they could hear the sound of voices drawing nearer, and could distinguish the forms of the figures that were approaching.

"It's the Boy," said the Little Teacher, excitedly.

"Bless the dear Boy, and may his name be praisèd," said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face.

"And the Medical!"

"Good luck! A thousand pounds to a penny piece he'll have got a flask on him!"

They quickened their steps.

The meeting was quite ordinary when it did come.

"Dr. Livingstone, I believe," said the Medical.

"All serene?" sang out the Boy.

"Not a bit the worse," answered the Little Teacher, with a happy laugh.

But the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face only said:

"If you've got either food or drink, man, don't stand parleying, but hand it over."

Both were forthcoming to a limited extent, and were duly handed over.

Seekers and sought then turned to follow the guidance of the farmer and his lad. By the light of

the lantern and even of the stars the path seemed easy enough to find, and the arrow-marked rocks were quite plain to see.

"It was all that cursed fog," said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, but he did not say it at all bitterly. The Medical by his side was giving an account of how they had searched high and low and yelled themselves hoarse.

"But the Welshers were game as anything and wouldn't give up. And then, by Jove, when we heard your shout, it was simply ripping!"

He said nothing, of course, about his wet and weary feet and aching limbs.

The Boy, proud to have the Little Teacher resting on his arm, was listening to her account of the long hours of foggy wandering. She said very little concerning the moment when they had found themselves on the edge of the precipice. There are some things one does not speak of, one only ponders them in one's heart.

After all the fatigues of the day it was a long, weary tramp home, and it need not be said at what hour of the night, or rather morning, this disreputable four stumbled dog-tired through the hospitable portal of Pen-y-gwyn. In the blaze of light and buzz of talk that greeted them they stood dazed and silent.

Then the Medical spoke.

"Here we are at last, and no harm done!"

"Oh-h-h-h!" said Mine Host.

CHAPTER XXV

"OF COURSE SHE IS OLD"

A BLAZINGLY hot summer's day had succeeded the short spell of mist and rain.

The Pen-y-gwyn guests, little if any the worse for yesterday's adventures, had spent the morning idly with books, work, and, of course, tobacco, on the shady lawn; in the afternoon they strolled down to Pensarn, and there chartered a boat in charge of a brown-faced sailor-man with the mystic words "Shell Island" set forth on the front of his blue jersey.

Now the truth is that Shell Island, or Mochras Isle, is really not an island at all; possibly in the far past it *was* an island, the ordnance map declares plainly that it is so still; yet there are folks who have walked to Mochras at all times and tides and have attained unto it dry-footed, too. But the majority of people, being informed by neat little placards that *viâ* Pensarn and the ferry is the one and only way to the far-famed Shell Island, believe what they are told, and duly take boat at the landing stage below the station. Whereat great profit

accrueth to the owner of the said boat, and the brown-skinned, black-eyed rower laugheth and showeth his white teeth.

The Pen-y-gwyn party were no exception to the general rule; they had no ambition to depart from the usual track, and were only anxious to conscientiously "do" the neighbourhood, that when their time of leaving came they might have no mountains, waterfalls, ruins or what-not lying heavy and "undone" on their mental digestion.

So Shell Island being in the authorised programme for the day, an island it was.

The air was still and the sun blazed upon the water; the low-lying marshes with their straight, rush-clothed dykes shimmered in the wavering heat. The water looked cool and refreshing; it was high tide and there was a pleasant ripple all along the foot of the dykes where the drift of twigs and straws and water-worn corks ebbed and flowed among the sedges.

The sea-birds skimmed and floated overhead with plaintive calls and answering cries; at a bend in the river stood a heron, sedate and motionless till the dip of the oars sent an unwarranted cross-ripple to his standing-place, when with a lazy flap of his broad wings he arose and passed away seaward, his long legs drifting behind him. The down-dropping sun dazzled the eyes that tried to follow him away to the westward; all the water was sparkling as though Danäe-gold were falling: beyond this lay the long grey line of Mochras with its lonely

farmhouse a dusky brown against the quivering western sky.

The island really did its very best to keep up the fiction and appear an island, for when the boat with its heavy load dropped down to the river's mouth, the tide had turned and was racing strongly seaward; so strongly that it was all the brawny boatman could do to keep his little craft stern on, whilst with some laughter mingled with little nervous shrieks from the Old-Young Lady, and plaintive queries from the Whitey-Brown Person as to whether a shipwreck were imminent, the men of the party did their best to land the ladies dry-shod and with their dainty summer plumage unsplashed.

Once on the pebbly shore the group as usual broke up. The Bread-and-Butter Misses stayed within a few feet of the landing-place to fill their baskets with the very first, and as it happened quite common shells they chanced to find.

The Brown-eyed Girl was eager to show a little rabbit-haunted lake on the island that she alone wot of. Of the party, only the Medical seemed interested in lakes. Others made their way to the weed-fringed rocks, amongst which the falling tide was sobbing and gurgling, leaving here and there little pools, crab-haunted and alluring.

The Little Teacher and the Boy were down on their hands and knees catching prawns with their fingers.

The Effective Girl and the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face walked a little apart. He, as he told himself

with something of a sigh, had "out-grown prawns." She said she did not see the fun of cutting her boots to pieces; besides, the sun was so hot, surely there must be shade to be had somewhere. Round the bend, if she remembered rightly, there was a cave or cliff. Her memory was pardonably vague, since she knew as well as Mochras itself that it no more possessed cliff or cave than it did the honest right to be called an island.

However, she had discovered before now that a small lie often answered the purpose of a big one, and this being so, the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, without any distinct volition in the matter, soon found himself the other side of the bend in question, and the Effective Girl did not seem at all abashed at the sight of the cliffless, caveless sand-dunes there outspread before them.

"We had better sit down here," she said, coolly, "and wait for the others."

So with certainly no immediate prospect of being joined by any one else, these two ensconced themselves alone under the lapis-lazuli of the sky, which deepened into purple where it met the grey-green grasses that crowned the pale gold of the sunlit sand-dunes that encircled them.

A great silence lay all around. Yet how different a silence, thought the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, from that of yesterday! This with its sunshine, the warm, live pulse of Nature, was the silence of softly breathing sleep; that with its wan, cold, misty shroud—the breath-deprived silence of death.

He glanced at his companion where she made a great blot of blackness on the golden-white of the sand behind her. Her pose was of studied grace; her clear pale face with its black points told admirably against the scarlet of her extended sunshade; her eyes, their glinting green duly veiled by their inky lashes, were fixed out to sea with an admirably yearning, pathetic expression. She sat motionless, sharing apparently in the universal stillness of the sultry afternoon; but within her heart was pulsing hotly, every nerve was quivering; she felt as though a crisis in her affairs was at hand, here was an opportunity snatched from Fate. Yet she, the usually bold and dauntless, who had boasted openly to her fellow-women that she stuck at nothing where a flirtation was concerned, hardly knew how to take advantage of such opportunity. She dared not put her fortune to the touch lest she should lose it all. She longed with a great longing that this hard-featured, self-possessed, cold-mannered man should throw aside his reserve, and in softer mood should take her hand in his; perhaps even—her eyes glinted like two emeralds as the exquisite thought stole through her body—he might with warm kisses own the love which she persuaded herself, hungrily, insistently, he was only hiding, suppressing beneath the cold and frigid manner that so well became him. She felt rather than saw that his bright, dark eyes were fixed on her face. Her breath came fast. Should she keep just so, until he spoke? or should she turn suddenly and with a flash

of her eyes surprise the love-looks that she felt ought to be in his? All the while she hated her weak self for this questioning uncertainty, she who had been accustomed always to act on the spur of the moment, without one thought behind.

To move or not to move?—that was her momentous question.

It mattered so little, had she known it, one way or the other, for the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face as it happened was not thinking of her at all, but of an elusively elfin face with clear, child-like eyes; and the scintillating sunlight no longer danced around him—in its place was white, wet mist.

So when, at last, the Effective Girl turned suddenly, she surprised no love-beam, but only a far-away look in the man's eyes. She knew, and raged inwardly at the knowledge, that he had never so much as seen the dazzlingly sudden green glint her eyes had wasted on him.

She covered her momentary confusion with a gay:

"A penny for your thoughts."

In answer to which challenge he replied, in the tone of one slowly returning from far fields of thought:

"They hardly would be worth the price to you, I think."

A stab of jealousy and the quick perception of love prompted her to reply:

"And a great deal more than that to you, perhaps?"

"It certainly would require some more tempting

bribe to induce me to part with them," he replied. "A penny, once one's toffee days are over, is such a foolish coin; there is nothing really purchasable with it but a box of matches. And there are times when even a match loses its interest."

"It depends upon the kind of match," replied the girl, with a slight tremor in her voice.

"Oh, 'safety,' of course," he answered, with a quick glance at the gleam below her down-dropped lashes. "One naturally has no desire to burn one's fingers. I, myself, have always felt a leaning to the old-fashioned flint-and-steel, and even that was not safe when tinder was about."

Flint and steel, thought the girl, yes, that is what he is made of. But what does he mean by the tinder?

She exultantly deemed her secret half-guessed.

But he was speaking.

"The poor tinder always has my sympathies."

"Why?" she asked, falteringly.

"So soon ignited, and so soon the little blaze dies out."

"One spark from the flint and steel will light it again."

"True, but give me something that once lit burns steadily on and for ever."

Again, he scarce knew why, he seemed to see two clear eyes shining like stars into his own.

But the Effective Girl thought with quickening, choking pulse:

"Oh, if I only dare tell him that just such a steady

flame he has lit in my heart, and that come life, come death, it will burn on for ever. Dare I, dare I?"

But she, till now the reckless devil-may-care, was turned into an arrant coward, and she knew it.

So she, with sudden impulse, influenced perhaps by his silent train of thought, only said:

"You would have been glad of any flame, however evanescent, I fancy, yesterday, when out in that awful fog."

He laughed.

"I know the dim light of the old horn lantern was very welcome."

"We have not heard yet," said she, "the real story of your adventures. How was it you got separated from us?"

"Ah, that is more than I can tell you."

"We thought, perhaps, that poor, dear creature was tired and lagged behind. It was very absurd, you know, her being of the party at all."

"And why?"

"Well, we were all young ones."

"You think her old?"

"Yes, don't you?"

"I sometimes think she is younger than any of us—younger, indeed, than some of us have ever been."

"She must be very juvenile."

The Effective Girl laughed. It was not a pretty laugh, and it floated over the sand-hill to where, a few yards off, came the Boy and the Little Teacher, hands and pockets full of treasures, and yet wandering in search of more.

The Little Teacher looked flushed and girlish, her hair loosened in the soft sea breeze, the sea itself in the brightness of her eyes, and the joy of yesterday still warm in her heart.

The little ugly, cruel laugh fell like a jarring note in the rhythm of the day's song.

It was followed clearly by the remark:

"It is a marvel to me she is no worse, at her age, for those long hours in the mist."

The answer came in lower tone, but though the words were lost, the voice was plainly that of the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face.

Then with a knife-like sharpness came the Effective Girl's reply:

"*Old*, of course she is *old*. You don't need very sharp eyes to see the grey hairs among those tight braids of hers."

"I think we will go back," said the Little Teacher to the Boy.

All the sunlight had died out of her face. Walking in the loose sand seemed suddenly heavy work.

CHAPTER XXVI

"HE *SHALL* LOVE ME"

"OLD, quite old," said the Little Teacher to herself. She held a candle closely to her masses of brown hair, unbraided now.

"Are there really grey hairs? Only this morning I felt so young. He came and talked to me in the garden just as always, only, somehow, it was not quite the same because of yesterday.

"I did not know my hair was turning grey, and I cannot see that it is by this light. I ought not to mind. It was all nonsense thinking I could get my youth back again, the youth Fate had so cruelly stolen.

"So, all the time, he has been just showing kindness to me because I am poor and old. It is just what a man of his chivalrous, noble nature would do. I must not let him sacrifice himself to his sense of kindness. No doubt he would a great deal rather talk to others—the Effective Girl for instance. As for me——"

The light broke out again on the little face.

"After all, I have something—I love *him*. Nothing can rob me of that."

And her dreams that night were not all sad ones.

But the Effective Girl tossed and turned and longed in vain for sleep.

She had schemed for Love, scoffed at Love, jested at Love. Love had bided his time and then had shot his arrow; it had pierced beneath her brazen armour, and he had fled laughing, for it was a poisoned one, and he had no fellow to it in his quiver. The victim of his shaft did not know this, would not have believed it had she known.

"He *must* love me," she moaned to herself. "He must love me at last. The only one I feared, that little designing thing who enticed him away into the mist, I think I have settled her. The next time she begins talking sentiment he will be busy looking for grey hairs. He may not find them, but he will still believe them to be there. I must watch her and him. I must be wary, must not spoil my chances by letting him see all that is in my heart. That is the hardest part of all, to hide what I feel from every one, most of all from him.

"I must win him. Life would be hateful to me now without him. He must, he *shall* love me, somehow!"

There was a time, not so very far distant, when she would have glibly declared that she could make any man she chose in love with her.

Now her confidence in her own powers was gone.

She tossed and turned, for the hunger that was in her heart would give her no peace.

"Perhaps all will come right," she tried to assure herself, "perhaps even now he is thinking of me. I wish I could see into his thoughts."

Had she known it, the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face was at that moment pacing the terrace at the other side of the house, discussing a last cigar, six per cent. South Colerados, and the rise in Egyptians with the Sandy Uncle, who when not holiday-making was connected with the Stock Exchange.

Somewhat apart and divinely alone walked the Medical; his thoughts were all of happiness, for had not the best and sweetest and most beautiful girl on earth all but promised to be his?

What a grand night it was! How immense the velvety sky, how bright the stars! And yonder—the third from the end on the second storey—was *her* window. Behind *her* window, too, were happy thoughts of a golden future when he and she should wander through a flowery world together, and, maybe, so good a thing was life, other tiny feet should go their ways beside them.

Love stood smiling on this threshold; in his hand drooped his slackened bow, his arrows were not needed here.

CHAPTER XXVII

"ANOTHER TOUCH WOULD SPOIL IT"

ON the Artro bank above Gwynfryn, mossy rocks and swirling, foam-flecked brown water on the canvas beside him, sat the Artist.

Near him, her fingers busy with some dainty needlework, was the Artist's Wife. On the far side of the river, painting with no unpractised hand an overhanging tree-stem and its dappled reflection in the pool below, stood the Artist's daughter—just these three alone.

As regards the master-craftsman and his spouse, this was nothing fresh ; more often than not they left the gay circle of their fellow-guests and went their quiet way alone.

At first the Brown-eyed Girl had usually accompanied them ; but, little by little, she had more frequently joined the larger party, until the gentle mother had noted with a sigh that their daughter was becoming theirs no longer.

"'Tis natural," said the Artist ; "the young birds must try their wings."

"Soon after that they leave the nest," answered the Wife.

They both sighed.

But to-day their child seemed all theirs once more.

She quietly joined them when starting, and so complete was their mutual sympathy that no questions were asked.

The day's programme had not been fully decided when the canvas-carrying detachment departed; and so hot was the discussion as to whether Snowdon were possible from Llanarto, and if so whether any one pony would be equal to taking the Widow to the top, that the Brown-eyed Girl slipped away unnoticed. She could hardly have told herself why she did so.

Some conscience-prick in the midst of her own happiness may have reminded her that these two people, till now her dearest, had been shamefully neglected of late.

Some impulse to give them herself whilst she was yet her own may have prompted her. Or possibly some overwhelming of maiden bashfulness at the memory of certain words and looks that had passed on the edge of a rabbit- and bird-haunted lake, between a couple that were neither rabbits nor birds. Or it may have been but a survival of the old primitive instinct which bade the female draw apart and hide, whilst the eager male gave chase. There she was at all events, painting away vigorously, even though, in the eyes that sought

the lichened bank for tone and colour, the love-light of yesterday still lingered.

The wise mother, raising her gentle blue eyes from her work, thought, "We have her still, but not for long."

The father worked on steadily, though now and again his eyes wandered to the white-clad form on the opposite bank.

The river between them rippled and gurgled, and splashed and swirled with a continuous low-toned music; the sunlight filtered through the overhanging branches, and fell upon the water, lighting up here and there the golden, sandy bottom in the shallows near the shore. So still was everything that a little fearless dipper, with white breast, bright eye and merry cocking tail, alit on a mossy stone to drink; and a great silver-splashed fritillary floated slowly above the water, and settled on a mauve-stained bramble flower that overhung the ripples, and in a ray of sunshine with rhythmic grace opened and closed his wings.

Upon this river-idyll of dreamy peace came suddenly the clatter of voices and laughter, the swish of feminine skirts, the tramp of masculine feet.

"Here she is," came in noisy tones, and the Brown-eyed Girl found two Bread-and-Buttery forms in linen frocks obscuring her tree-trunk, and making blue wobbling reflections in place of amber and brown.

She became conscious, too, of a certain step

coming nearer and nearer; she did not turn her head, perhaps because of her tell-tale cheeks.

"By Jove," cried a manly voice, "that is fine! You've hit it to a T. I'd no idea you could paint like that.

"Isn't she clever?" added the Medical, for of course it was he, appealing to the crowd for confirmation of his remarkably unbiassed art criticism.

A buzz of admiration arose from the other members of the "Hunt," as the Sandy Uncle had facetiously styled the party, mingled with such inane remarks as:

"How long has it taken you?"

"What colours do you use?"

"Is that water or oil in that little pot?"

"I can't think how you know where to begin."

"Or when to end."

"That at least is plain," said the Medical, in a low tone meant only for one pink little ear: "now is the time to end."

"You think it is finished?" asked the Brown-eyed Girl, softly.

"Quite," said he, taking the brush from her hand.

Their eyes and their fingers met—met and lingered for the space of one golden minute.

They were alone together, for the remainder of the "Hunt" had "found" again in the work of the Artist himself, and were beside themselves in more or less genuine admiration and more unmeaning criticism.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face alone stood

silent till the rest of the throng had buzzed themselves away. Then he said strenuously:

"I'd give ten years of my life to be able to paint like that."

Without waiting for any rejoinder he too passed on, to give place to the Brown-eyed Girl, who said coaxingly to her father:

"Do come and look at my sketch, and tell me what you think of it."

The Artist smiled, and palette still on thumb crossed over the wooden footbridge and stood before his daughter's easel.

He looked at the canvas critically for a moment, and then:

"It's coming on," he said, briefly, but encouragingly.

"I thought it was finished," said the Brown-eyed Girl, diffidently.

The Artist drew one of the brushes out of the little bundle in his palette-hand, and, poising it betwixt right finger and thumb, began to point out that more depth was wanted *here*, more breadth *there*, a touch of greyish light on the under side of the tree-stem, a suspicion more of amber where the sunlight struck the water, and so on; till turning to see if his daughter quite followed him, he found the little puss was not attending at all, her brown eyes were fully occupied, it seemed, in trying to hide themselves beneath a dark fringe of lashes from the hot pursuit of two grey-blue eyes.

With a half-smile the Artist replaced the brush.

"Another touch would spoil it," he decided.

"I'm so glad—I mean that you think it's all right——" faltered the maiden. "And as it is finished," she went on, "don't you think I might leave it at one of the cottages whilst I join the others? I rather wanted to explore the Nantcol—that's where they are going."

"Leave it here, child. I'll take care of it," said her father.

His old dog-like eyes under their fuzzled brows looked rather wistfully after her slight form as it passed lightly away in the sunshine, her happy lover at her side.

CHAPTER XXVIII

WOODEN-FACE AND WILL-O'-THE-WISP

THE morning was bright and beautiful; a light breeze just stirred the tree-tops, and lifted here and there a bracken-crest, and swayed it gently to and fro. The way lay through a pinewood, the pungent scent of the pines filled the clear mountain air; the fallen needles made a springy pathway beneath the feet.

The Bread-and-Butter Misses darted hither and thither chasing butterflies, pelting one another with fallen cones, and occasionally taking irreverent aim at the pink semi-circle of nudity below their Uncle's striped cricketing cap. He had a herbarium slung on one shoulder, and the Old-Young Lady was feigning great interest in the mosses he was collecting.

The Boy, after hovering in vain attendance on the Effective Girl, and being snubbed for his pains, at length joined in the fir-cone bombardment, slyly inciting the Bread-and-Butter Misses to bolder and bolder onslaughts, till the Parson's fat back received more than one rap, and even the Widow's portly form was not held sacred from attack.

After a few minutes the fray became general. The storm of cones flew fast and furious.

The Little Teacher was an amused onlooker. The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, also a non-combatant, crossed under fire to her side.

"Let me conduct you to a place of safety," he said, with one of his rare smiles.

"I'm not afraid of being hit," said she, brightly. "It's rather fun watching them. They seem so young, somehow. Look at the Widow, she never by chance hits any one, all her cones fly back over her own shoulder, yet I'm sure she's enjoying it. And the Whitey-Brown Person—look at her set face—she is terribly in earnest, and means to conquer or die."

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face understood of whom the Little Teacher spoke, for in the delightful intimacy springing up between these two she had by now made him free of her special nomenclature.

"What is my nickname?" he had asked.

The Little Teacher had been silent.

"Perhaps you have not honoured me with one."

"Oh, yes, I have."

"When?"

"Almost the first moment I saw you."

"What is it?"

"You might be offended."

"I promise you I will not."

"I really dare not tell."

"If I ask it as a favour?" The musical voice had been very pleading.

The Little Teacher had looked away.

"If you will promise you won't be offended, and if you'll not tell any one else——"

"I promise solemnly."

"Well then—I called you—I daresay you will be vexed after all—I called you——"

"Yes?"

There is no knowing what he had expected or whether he had any defined anticipations at all, but certainly he was not prepared for the words that followed.

"I called you—the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face."

For the first time in their acquaintance the Man had laughed aloud. It was a musical laugh too, good to hear.

"The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face," he had repeated; "that's splendid! magnificent! You have surpassed yourself. I like my title best of all. Wooden-Face—it really isn't bad."

"You are not angry then?" This rather anxiously.

"Angry! I should think not. Who could be angry with a will-o'-the-wisp?"

"So that's what you call me?" she had returned with spirit.

"Yes—Wooden-Face and Will-o'-the-Wisp. They go rather well together."

For an instant his eyes had looked into hers, and all else had seemed to her dim and far away.

That moment, at the time of the pine-cone fray, was already past history. The disclosure had

certainly helped to draw the two nearer, if only by the little innocent secret they held in common.

It was not often, however, that their evil genius in the shape of the Effective Girl gave them an undivided chance of enjoying each other's company. So many and so various were the schemes and ruses by which she secured the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face for herself, so guileless and new to the game was the Little Teacher, so easily cajoled or befooled time after time, without suspecting it was anything but chance that gave her for companion now the Whitey-Brown Person intent on some needlework, now the Bread-and-Butter Misses asking her help in some childish prank, sometimes even the also-duped Boy, always to the exclusion of the stiff, taciturn man upon whom she had poured out unsparingly the pent-up affections of her frost-bitten life.

In truth, the Effective Girl had come to such sore straits in her jealousy that she could not bear to see the Little Teacher and the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face together for a moment.

"At any rate that little cat shall not have him," she said to herself.

But to-day her attention was temporarily taken off by a new-comer, a tall, languid-looking man with a drooping figure and eye-glasses. He wore clothes of a mushroom-brown; his hair, which was exactly the same shade, was long and lank, and brushed back behind his ears. He had a look of wearily questioning the value of life, and a habit of asking, "Why?" in an uninterested, bored sort of a way.

The Little Teacher had added him to her collection as the Query, and straightway thought no more about him.

The Effective Girl, in spite of her preoccupation, found old habit too strong for her, and brought out all her usual arts and wiles to attach a new-comer to her train.

The Query seemed quite willing to be so attached, possibly because it was the line of least resistance.

At present he was employed in wearily collecting ammunition for his self-constituted commander; though he owned languidly that he didn't see why any one should want to throw cones at any one? They hurt if they hit, "doncher-know."

For some folks the pinal warfare had its advantages. The figures of the Brown-eyed Girl and the Medical were already lessening in the green vista ahead.

"Shall we stroll on?" suggested the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face to the Little Teacher.

They strolled on.

CHAPTER XXIX

"LOVE ONCE, LOVE ALWAYS"

"TALKING of the future," said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face to the Little Teacher (it had become rather a habit with these two to concern themselves greatly with the "may-be's" of life),—"talking of the future, supposing you could plan yours for yourself, on what special fate would your choice fall?"

He was not looking at her, but away into the greenwood. Delivered in his usual somewhat stiff manner, the question sounded impersonal enough.

The Little Teacher hesitated a moment, and looked away before she replied:

"I should be satisfied with the common lot."

"What do you call the common lot?"

The Little Teacher flushed hotly, but replied bravely:

"I suppose to have a home of one's own, to—be married."

It was not at all likely the Man saw her crimsoned cheeks, for he was carefully scanning the pine-needles at his feet.

"So you are like the rest," he said, musingly, "and *beforehand* regard marriage as heaven."

"And afterwards?"

"Too many find it hell," he said, cynically.

"I would rather have hell than nothing at all," she replied, and there was a thrill in her voice.

It was a pathetic sign of the emptiness of her past life, this yearning desire she had for some fulness in that which was to come.

"You don't know what you are talking of," he said, and his voice was hard and cold. "You moan over your dull, eventless years, but, believe me, a lifetime of such were better than marriage without love."

"I did not mean without love."

The words fell softly as a wood-pigeon's coo.

"You think love does not necessarily make heaven?" The words were more muttered than spoken.

"I can conceive a state in which the very fact of love might add intensity to the pangs of hell."

"As how?"

"If he—I mean she—one loved"—she felt herself trembling—"proved utterly unworthy, one would love still, it could not alter that; yet imagine the anguish of the suffering."

"You think the love would survive such knowledge?" The tone was eager, but the face seen clearly against a dark pine background was as wooden as ever. "Do you really think it would survive?"

"I am sure it would."

"Ah, don't be too sure,"—the musical voice had a note of suffering now. "After all," he added in a lighter tone, "it is but a child yet and knows nothing of life."

"I am quite aware," answered the Little Teacher, with gentle dignity, "that from your point of view I know nothing of life. Yet all the time I feel I am right."

"Love once, love always! Ah, you are flitting over a quagmire all the time, only, happy little will-o'-the-wisp, you do not know it."

"I believe I am very happy," said the Little Teacher, sedately.

The man beside her lapsed into gloomy silence. It was a habit of his which had at first greatly troubled the tender heart of his little companion. He is bored, or I have said something foolish, she had thought with compunction. She was used to this characteristic now, and it troubled her not at all.

It was good sometimes to feel no need of spoken words, to walk in silent companionship, to draw full breaths of mountain air, to watch, as now, the myriad joyous life dancing in the long sun-rays that shot radiantly through the dusky wood, to note the intense blue, far-off, solemn, beyond the mazy trees, to listen to the sighing of the passing wind, to have the calm joy of solitude and the subtle delight of a loved presence, all heaped with no niggard hand into one rich hour of life. Was not that happiness enough for any one?

It had come at last to this that she did not even regret the long empty years of waiting. She called it expectation now. For was not fulfilment here at last? So she walked, crowned, exultant. All around one love-song, and the Little Teacher in its midst.

CHAPTER XXX

THE QUIET POOL

THE silent charm of nature was soon to be dispersed. The merry legions of the fir-cone had tired of their sport and proceeded on their way.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face and the Little Teacher, resting now in sympathetic silence, were noisily overtaken.

The Effective Girl was weary of the Query. With a flash and a chatter and a description of general post, of which she was a past master, she soon succeeded in re-sorting the entire party, and securing once more the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face as her companion.

"They are going, some of them, to take a short cut across the open mountain side," she said, "but it will be much nicer by the shady banks of the river. Let us lead the 'shady set.'"

She laughed as she put her hand lightly on his arm. The laugh rang triumphantly through the woodlands.

The Little Teacher, left to pursue her way alone,

heard it plainly; it seemed to her personal, derisive, as though it would say, "You see, I can take him from you at any moment."

The face that turned as the laugh died away looked brilliant, beautiful, but as the Little Teacher felt, she scarcely knew why, wicked—a sort of wickedness that seemed only lately to have come into her narrow world, with all the other things good and bad that had burst on her simple mind since her plunge into the society of Pen-y-gwyn.

"I hope he does not love her," she found herself thinking; "not but what I should like him to be happy with some beautiful girl, only *she* would not make him happy, *she* is not good enough for *him*." Certain words and sayings the Effective Girl had let fall, which had been as a foreign tongue to the Little Teacher on the first hearing, had, in the light of her baptism of knowledge, begun to assume meaning for the simple little soul, a meaning which made her cheeks burn and her whole self revolt from the brilliant girl so many years her actual junior, whole ages her senior as regards a knowledge of the seamier side of life.

The Little Teacher walked alone and communed with herself.

For the first time the love which was in her own heart did not content her. "If only he could care for me a little bit, a very little bit!" she thought, and cried with an exceeding bitter cry to Fate to give back her stolen youth. If she were only young, pretty as she might have been, had not the frosts

of Life untimely cut short her blossoming, could she not have hoped for some return?

"We are good friends," she thought, "he and I. I don't think it is all pity on his part; I really believe he likes to be with me, to talk to me—in fact, I think I interest him. But men want more than that in those they love, in those they marry."

Her mind had lingered long upon the flowery road, but had reached the portal at last. Love was no longer the end-all and be-all to her that it had been. She had not yet left her Eden, but her thoughts had begun to stray to the country that was beyond, not so fair a land it might be, but filled with the warmth of common things, the joys, the sorrows, and the daily toil illumined by the fond presence that might walk there at her side. There she stopped blushing guiltily as though the dreamy wood were full of summer sprites who might read her unspoken thoughts. She drew herself up sharply.

"I am old and plain. My life has been wasted. I can never be anything to such as he."

Poor Little Teacher blossoming into the Indian summer of her starveling life, she was certainly, had she known it, not without beauty, fitful, elusive as it was; not without charm either, the charm of an innocent mind in a world too full of knowledge of a sort, of an absolutely truthful soul in a world where deception has become the rule of life, a heart simple and affectionate, where hearts are far from simple, and affectionate only toward themselves.

And he upon whom she had set that child-like

heart in the glory of its first love—for first love is first love, comes it at seventeen or thirty-seven—was after all no god among men. Strip from him the hard impassiveness of his face and a manner somewhat uncommon, and he would remain a very ordinary man, neither better nor worse than his fellows; the secret of his past, had it one, neither more elevating nor less degrading than that of theirs.

But the Little Teacher, passing along through the woodland in alternate bands of sunlight and shade, no more knew the Man for what he was than does the primitive heathen the nature of the idol, grim, repulsive, to which in abject worship he abases the lordly form, made, only he knows it not, in the very image of his Maker.

So musing, her thoughts, like the woodland around her, neither wholly light nor entirely dark, the Little Teacher plunged ever deeper and deeper in the tangle of mossy tree-trunk and giant ferns and hanging festoons of fragrant yellow wood-honeysuckle, amongst thickets of bramble still starred with blossoms white and mauve, although the clustering berries were red and brown, and even, here and there, a bright, pure black.

She had missed the path, though it could not be far off, as now and again a voice or a laugh, mellowed by distance, invaded her solitude. She did not fear to lose her way, as all the time she kept in touch with the merry river, purling, singing, rushing or whispering at her side. Presently she became conscious of a stronger, hoarser tone mingling with its voice; a

sound which grew louder and louder as she went, till it almost drowned with its deep bass note the love-song to which her ear had become attuned.

She became aware of a rocky cliff, moss-hung, which barred her onward way. This skirted with cautious hands and feet, suddenly the roar increased to thunder, and before her eyes a rock-bound gorge; down the far side of this dashed in one white shower of spray the pent-up stream. The crest of the cliff shone green and gold in the sunlight, its rocky sides were hung with glistening ivy and shaking fern-fronds be-gemmed with spray; a rainbow quivered athwart the snowy water-column.

Above light and glory, but below all was gloom, for the waterfall, a happy thing full of life and sunshine, lost its joyous self in a still dark pool.

The Little Teacher stood on the mossy, water-soaked verge and gazed far down into the depths, green, translucent, inky black beneath the floating white bubbles that gathered and broke and gathered again with an endless persistent monotony. Fascinating it was, but treacherous, and after the rush and roar above, how deathly quiet.

"After the stir and bustle of life, the quiet pool," thought the Little Teacher.

She looked up to the summit of the sun-crowned cliff.

How easy would be a swift passage through the spray-filled air! how sure, how relentless the black depths below!

"The quiet pool," she said again, and she

shuddered, and would have torn herself away, but its fascination held her.

She was not sorry when the spell was broken by the sudden appearance of two bright Bread-and-Buttery faces over the edge of the cliff.

"How did you get down there?" asked one voice.

"Isn't it grand?" said the other.

"Thank Heaven we're here at last," came next moment from the Widow as she mopped her face and slowly lowered herself on to a bilberry-cushioned rock.

"Why do people care for waterfalls?" asked the Query, languidly arranging his mushroom-brown against an ivy-clad background.

"Is it a conundrum?" inquired the Old-Young Lady.

"Because they can't climb trees," hazarded the Boy from where he sat swinging his legs nonchalantly over the very spot whence the Little Teacher had imagined so tragic a plunge.

"Are we all here?" asked the Sandy Uncle.

No one saw fit to make reply, though it must have been pretty plain to even a casual observer that the Brown-eyed Girl and the Medical were conspicuous by their absence. They had had a long start, and it was natural they should be ahead.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face and the Effective Girl were likewise nowhere to be seen. Perhaps they had stayed away in unspoken answer to the Query's remark. Doubtless they did *not* care for waterfalls.

CHAPTER XXXI

"I AM OUT OF THE RUNNING"

"YOU might be in love."

"What if I am?" said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face.

It was not for nothing that the Effective Girl had purposely missed the path through the wood, though so far her companion had strode along apparently even more erect and unapproachable than usual.

She tried all her many arts. Beyond the monosyllable of politeness she could get nothing out of him. At last she boldly rallied him on his silence.

"You might be in love."

"What if I am?" answered he.

Her heart commenced to beat painfully, but she answered banteringly:

"'Tis a fell disease, and you are greatly to be pitied."

"I am not sure as yet that I am suffering from this complaint. Tell me, what are the symptoms?"

"Does he know, or is he mocking me?" thought the Girl. But aloud she said gaily:

"I have been *told* that they are many."

"I am so ignorant of these matters, pray enlighten me," said the Man.

The Girl moistened her dry lips, but she laughed as she replied:

"I will enumerate, and you must see whether you recognise any of the symptoms in yourself or others. Firstly, I should place a 'moody silence.'"

"Then plainly *you* are not a victim."

"A loss of appetite."

"Then the heart of the dear Boy is safe. I had my doubts before."

"A tendency to quote poetry."

"A certain Uncle with a suspicion of baldness."

"A dislike for general company shown by a desire to wander off in couples."

"Heaven help us, then, we are all in love!" said the Man.

The Girl dropped her bantering mood.

"Then if we are *all* in love," she said, softly, "present company cannot be excepted."

"Present company cannot be excepted," repeated the Man, parrot-fashion.

"Then," said the Girl, and for a moment her eyes shone like the green of the western sky between thick pine-trees, "I have proved my case and *you* are in love."

There was a thrill in the voice, and the supple figure seemed to drift nearer to him in the silence of the greenwood.

"Granted," said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, "but in that case you also, coming under the head

of present company, must be suffering from this sore disease."

"What if I am?"

She tried to say it defiantly, but in spite of herself the erect head with its blue-black hair drooped a little. Does he know? Will he understand? beat her trembling heart.

"This is interesting," remarked the Man, and despite his immovable face there was a glint of laughter in his eyes.

"May I guess as to the Beloved? Let me think—— Why—the Parson of course. Am I not right the very first time?"

He is turning it into ridicule, thought the Girl, despairingly, she who had so often enjoyed ridiculing others. But that was so very different. However, she rallied bravely.

"Too old and too fat," she said.

"Of course he's too old. I shall be right this time, though—the rosy-cheeked, innocent Boy."

"Too young and not——"

"Sufficiently seasoned. It might be the medical student; but I'm afraid it would be a case of unrequited love and 'the worm in the bud,' you know."

"He's too raw for my taste."

"Something more mature. Well, how about the kindly Uncle with the fatherly manner and the Venetian (isn't that the proper term?) the Venetian hair?"

"Too little of the Venetian hair and too much of the fatherly manner. Besides, fancy being aunt-in-law to two ready-made nieces."

"I am afraid I must give it up unless, indeed, it is a case of love at first sight—lanky hair and an eye-glass 'doncher-know.'"

"He would be certain to ask me why he loved me, and that would be a puzzler." Again the gleam. It was wasted.

"I give it up," said the Man.

"You haven't mentioned every one." For the life of her, her voice would not assume the playful air she aimed at; her heart was in her throat and nearly choking her. "There is one—at any rate—of whom you have not spoken."

"The Artist?"

"No."

"Our Host?"

"*No.*"

"Buttons?"

"*No!*"

"My tired brain refuses to go further. We must leave the case at this: beauteous maiden, suffering from the deadly disease, amour; cause, or causes, unknown."

The Effective Girl made one last snatch at what she felt to be a lost opportunity, almost chokingly she forced out the words:

"You have left out yourself."

"I should not have dared to mention my own name in such a connection," said the Man, lightly.

"Why not?" she breathed. Her bosom rose and fell, her colour came and went, her eyes among their

dark lashes shone like jewels. At the moment there was something tiger-like, terrible, in her beauty.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face felt his blood quicken in his veins. His deep-set eyes looked straight into hers, then he turned away.

"I am altogether out of the running," he said, and lapsed into moody silence.

The Effective Girl walked beside him trying to piece together the import of his words. Was he married already? engaged? or only attached? If this last—to whom?

She felt in any case she had not lost ground. He knew now, she felt sure, that she loved him. At this stage of the proceedings that might or might not be an advantage; but in the momentary gaze of his dark eyes she had at least read one thing, he certainly acknowledged her beautiful, and that was half-way to triumph.

The only really beautiful girl in the place, and he knew it. Her step grew firmer, her eyes brightened; and when they soon after rejoined the rest of the party (for the astute Effective Girl had only lost the path as long as it served her purpose to do so), she was in quite her usual high spirits; rallying her aunt over her walking powers; carrying on a passage of arms with the Parson, in which he by no means came off conqueror; casting alluring looks in the direction of the Query, sentimental glances towards the Sandy Uncle; and finally monopolising the Boy, who had temporarily shaken off the depression caused by his charmer's desertion,

and was getting on "rippingly," as he would have put it, with the elder of the Bread-and-Butter Misses.

Poor Boy, it was spider and fly over again. He was shaking himself free, that would never do, so fresh webs of silk were woven round him, and at the end of the walk the Boy found himself more desperately in love than before.

That night the Effective Girl nodded at her reflection, which was already radiant with triumph.

But the Little Teacher woke from her first sleep with a smothered cry and a dew of perspiration. She had dreamed of the quiet pool, had felt its ice-cold waters closing over her.

CHAPTER XXXII

"I WON'T BE BEATEN"

IT was evening. The sun was dropping in an almost cloudless west.

The Artist had set off up the steep woodland path leading to the open hillside to watch the sea bid farewell to the day.

With him went his daughter, with him too went the Medical. The three were chatting together cheerfully as they passed across the long evening shadows. Behind them at intervals came others, also sunset-bound.

The Effective Girl was not amongst them, she was confined to her room with a swollen face. It was impossible at this crisis to appear downstairs with a swollen face ; so she stayed above and cursed her luck, and fumed, and fretted, and altogether gave her aunt a very bad time of it.

Behind the lace curtain of her window she watched the others set out.

"Little fool!" she apostrophised the Brown-eyed Girl. "What do you want with your father when you have got a lover? Possibly, though, you are playing up for his consent."

Then, as the Sandy Uncle and Ringlets tripped across the lawn:

"Humph, that's something new. Had her fling, I suppose, and wants to settle down respectably in the eleventh hour. Silly old thing! He seems to like it all the same."

Her colour rose a little as the Boy passed briskly out of sight, bending his handsome young head to his special Bread-and-Butter Miss.

"So that's how he consoles himself for my absence. I'll make him pay for this to-morrow."

For a few moments she waited in restive silence. A group of people came out together and gathered in a little knot of talk and laughter on the lawn. From this group presently detached themselves two figures, one, small, slight, grey-clad, the other tall, straight, wooden of face and limb.

They slowly strolled after the other sunset-seekers.

The Effective Girl's face was not good to see as she watched them; the swelling, though only a slight one, was yet enough to draw one side of the mouth up into a mocking smile, which in contrast with the angry eyes and frowning brow had a most sinister effect.

These two figures out of sight, the Effective Girl left the window and threw herself stormily into a chair.

"I won't be beaten," she muttered, with clenched teeth. "If I cannot have him myself at least *she* shall not. I can do nothing now but think, think."

For once she was absolutely natural, as she sat huddled up on the hard little bedroom chair, one

hand supporting her chin, tapping with her finger-nails upon her white pointed teeth. The mocking smile was still there, due, doubtless, to the swollen cheek.

Through the open window came cheerful voices from the strollers on the lawn, for the air was sultry and no one cared to be inside.

She could hear her aunt's fat chortle and the shrill laugh of the Old-Young Lady; the happy giggle of the mateless Bread-and-Butter Miss and the gentle voice of the Artist's Wife.

The Effective Girl heard all this, but heeded not, her mind was with the last couple that had passed away among the tree-stems.

If evil thoughts could ban, then would that couple have been indeed accursed. The woodland would have been blighted for their sakes, no happy birds would have piped soft vespers in their ears, rather the bat and the owl and the toad would have crossed their path for ill.

In this case evil thoughts, like curses, only went home to roost, and that quiet pair passed on through the peace of the evening untroubled by any vision of the dark girl with the evil face, whose hate for one of the two was growing almost as terrible a thing as her love for the other.

With a mind as dark as the scowl upon her brow she sat on in her little dingy chamber whilst the last ray of sunlight faded from its place high up on the wall, and the light grew grey into twilight, then slowly deepened into night.

CHAPTER XXXIII

"THERE IS NOTHING HIDDEN FROM LOVE"

"SHALL we be in time for the sunset?" asked the Little Teacher.

"Yes, whatever you have missed you shall be in time for the sunset," answered the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face.

"I was going to say it would be like my luck to be just too late. But that would be ungrateful of me after the happy time I have had here."

"So it has been a happy time?"

"The happiest of all my life?"

"But supposing—*when*, I mean—you go back to that other grey life?"

"Come what come may, I shall have had my day," quoted the Little Teacher with a smile, though her eyes were suspiciously bright.

"And will so little suffice to make your day?" The voice was very tender.

"So *little*. I don't call it little. I have had the greatest, nearly—no, *quite* the greatest happiness that could fall to any one's lot."

"And that is?"

"A secret," said the Little Teacher.

Her eyes were cast down; her uncovered hair just ruffled by the evening breeze glinted like bronze in a long level ray of sunshine.

"A secret. But, my little Will-o'-the-Wisp, did we not swear eternal friendship up there in the cold grey mist? or if we did not I am sure we ought to have done. And friendship should have no secrets."

"There are some things hidden even from friendship," said the Little Teacher.

A languorous calm was upon the hour. She felt as though drifting on a silent, golden river where she knew not, where she cared not if only *one* were by her side.

In the silence that followed the Man bent nearer.

"There is nothing hidden from love," he said.

The sun had now gone down. It was dusk among the tree-stems; not cold, grey dusk, but warm, vital still, with the sunlight of departed day. The birds here and there piped a low note of love. "Love," whispered the breeze among the pine-tops, "love" shone from each starry flower and waved from every humble grass-blade.

The Little Teacher turned and looked at the Man beside her. "Love," said her pure clear eyes.

They were all alone in the shadow of the forest. The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face drew the Little Teacher to him, and—once—twice—his lips pressed hers.

The Little Teacher's heart leapt to her pulsing lips. For a moment the whole earth felt dim and

far away whilst she herself was wrapped in a warm mist of ecstasy.

A moment later the solid earth was once more beneath her feet, the trees with their mossy stems were around her, the lichened rocks with spreading ferns growing in their clefts.

Her lips still tingled, her cheeks burned, her breath came fast. She shyly glanced at her companion.

Stern, wooden-faced as ever, he looked straight ahead to where the evening star shone already from the darkening sky.

"I am afraid we are too late after all for the sunset," presently said the Little Teacher, in a voice that trembled a little.

"But not for the after-glow," said the Man, and his voice thrilled his listener.

In silence they mounted the rocky path with its tiny trickling streams, rushy tufts and bright scattered stars of buttercup yet luminous from their long day's draught of sunshine. Up, up they went in the tender blessed stillness, until they reached the topmost crest of the bare rocky cliff which had looked velvety-grey before them against the pale, pink-petalled eastern sky, but now, under their feet, showed wan and white, reflecting back the light of the still luminous zenith. Below them the massy pine-tops lay a warm black; beyond, the grey of the distant marshes, parted by the winding curves of a river of gold; beyond the marshes the sea blushing back to meet the blushing sky, and, floating 'twixt sea and sky, the pale rose-purple of the distant hills.

"The Islands of the Blest," murmured the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face.

The Little Teacher spoke no word, but in her heart a bird was singing: "Come what come may, I shall have had my day."

The rose-tints paled one by one, the distant hills were lost in mist, the sea turned from rose to purple, from purple to grey, the river and the marshes were as one; twilight stole across everything like the grey shadow that passes over the face of the dying.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face and the Little Teacher became conscious they were not the only ones upon the rocky crest.

The Artist was closing his sketch-book with a sigh because Life was so short and Nature so unconquerably beautiful.

The Boy and his Bread-and-Butter Miss were seated on a rock. She was quoting Hiawatha.

The Brown-eyed Girl and the Medical had wandered into the shadows of the wood.

Well-nigh in silence they all passed through the darkening forest and across the dewy meadows, so returning into the world of light and laughter and song. For the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face sang as he had not yet sung, and the Little Teacher accompanied as one enchanted.

"A dangerous voice that," said the Widow, as she had done once before.

Something was stirring in her bosom beneath its weight of fat as it had not stirred for years.

In the general applause the Medical and the Brown-eyed Girl alone were silent. They were studying the "Life of John Morgan," their hands met beneath his faded cover, their eyes looked into one another's, the song had told them all that was in their hearts.

It has been said that to each and all of us comes once, if only once in this life, one hour of perfect happiness—our heritage from a long-lost Eden. That night, all alone by herself, the Little Teacher had her hour.

She was not old now, nor plain, she was beautiful with the eternal youth, the eternal beauty of a first pure love.

"He loves me! He loves me! Can it be true—really true?"

Then in a great burst of thankfulness she went down on her knees beside her bed.

The Little Teacher's hour was a very perfect one.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face had no such hour. Perhaps he had had his in the years of his life that were hidden, perhaps he had not recognised it when it came. Certain it is the present was not his hour.

As he walked up and down in the warm dusk night the cigar between his lips was unlit and cold. He could not get the Little Teacher's glowing eyes out of his thoughts, nor the touch of her virgin lips from his mind.

"A momentary madness," he assured himself.

Yet she, she had so little in her life. Her first holiday, her first happiness, and how was it to end?

"Curse me for a vain fool," he said, "but I believe the little creature loves me."

Once again he dwelt on the thought of how her future might be brightened, her days made glad with comfort and pleasure. This time, though, it was no vague "good fellow" who was to bear her company.

"No, it must be the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face," he said, with a little hard laugh.

"Ah, Will-o'-the-Wisp," he added, "where is it all to end?"

Suddenly, his mood changing, he flung away his unsmoked cigar with a smothered curse.

"I must draw back," he said, "must 'if needs be use some rough discourtesy to blunt or break her passion.'"

He sighed as he turned to enter the darkened house, the last that night to seek the blest unconsciousness of slumber.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"THE CLEVEREST WINS"

"I HAVE come to you for help," said the Effective Girl.

"Well, it won't be the first time you've asked and had it," replied the Widow, cheerfully.

She was seated on the lawn under the shade of a spreading oak, her capacious form was snugly tucked into a wicker-chair, an effervescing drink was on a small table at her elbow, a yellow-back was open on her knee.

She had prepared for an afternoon's enjoyment. But Fate, in the person of her niece, dressed in creamy white and black lace, willed otherwise.

The Widow was nothing if not good-natured, she closed her book.

It really showed most noble self-denial, for the page recently scanned informed her that:

"—— two great frightened eyes looked back from the Countess Elinor's mirror, the fingers that clasped a massive string of pearls round a neck no less white than they, trembled; for in that mirror she plainly saw her husband draw off the evening coat he wore,

and whistling a cheerful stave advance towards the cupboard in the recess. There, as the terrified Countess knew, hung his velvet smoking-jacket——"

And there, as both she and the Widow knew, crouched concealed—the Other Man!

However, duty was duty, the Other Man would have to crouch, and the frightened Countess stare trembling into the mirror, until this importunate niece of real life had had her say.

The Effective Girl sank into a seat by her aunt's side.

She seemed in no hurry after all to speak. Her face looked flushed as she fanned herself with a large black fan.

At last she broke the silence.

"It is perfectly disgusting," she said.

Now her aunt, during her patient waiting, had naturally allowed her thoughts to wander to the Countess's bedchamber, idly presenting the circumstances to herself as a sort of social problem. In like situation what would she, the Widow, do—— Her meditations thus rudely broken in upon, she started.

"Disgusting, what?" she asked.

"The way she is going on."

"*She* being——"

"That little white-faced, badly dressed person who insists on appropriating the only man here worth having."

"Being——?" asked the Aunt.

"You know who," returned her niece, pettishly, regardless of grammar.

"And pray why may the poor little person not appropriate a certain gentleman who shall be nameless? He is too stiff and solemn for my taste, but if he pleases her——?"

"Aunt, you have been very good to me," said the Effective Girl, with a sudden change of tone.

"Oh, well! I daresay I've pleased myself in the matter."

This aloud; but "What does the little cat want of me now?" was the Widow's inward remark.

"Yes, you have been very good to me, and I know I have been a great expense, and I don't want to be on your hands always."

"I certainly shouldn't relish seeing my niece an old maid. But you've had your chances, my girl, it's your own fault if you haven't taken them. There was that young fellow at Scarboro', he was rich if he did squint a bit, and the Parson at Pen-maenmawr, and those two lawyer chaps at Connis Head, they were ready to fight over you. Lots more there have been. I'm sure I forget their names, we meet so many people moving about like this, and I've never interfered with any of your pranks. But this I will say, you have always been well dressed, and have taken well wherever we've been. You've certainly had your chances."

"Not *here*, auntie."

"I must own the eligibles here are rather scarce; but you know why we came. It was your own idea. 'Let us do the summer on the cheap,' you said, 'then we can have a better fling in the winter.' Still, if

you want to move on, I won't say no, though for my part, I must say, I'm very 'comfy' here."

She took a sip of the drink which still effervesced, and allowed one long traitor of a look to rest on the yellow-back.

"I don't want to go."

The Effective Girl was quite pale now; perhaps the fanning had cooled her too suddenly.

"I want to stay here, auntie; don't you see how it is?"

The green eyes looked up almost tenderly.

"I was right all along, she is beautiful," thought the Widow. Aloud she said:

"I was never clever at reading riddles. I thought you wanted my help."

"I wish she'd be done and let me get back to my book," she added, mentally.

"I do want your help, but you are not giving it. Don't you *see*, auntie, can't you *tell* that at last I am in love?"

"Humph! Thought you always scoffed at love."

"Perhaps I did," said the girl, dreamily tracing a pattern on her gown with the furled ebony of her fan. "That was because I knew nothing about it. Now I *know!*"

"And how do you like the experience?"

After all, this was not nearly as interesting as the Countess Elinor's adventures.

"*Like* it? It's terrible!"

That unsympathetic auntie actually laughed.

Her fat soul had never been stirred deep enough to reach the "terrible."

"You laugh," said the Effective Girl, scornfully, "because you have never felt what I am feeling now. I love him and I'd give anything, do anything, to make him love me. I believe I'd murder that little sneaking thing with her low voice and quiet ways and pretence of claiming his pity. But men don't marry for pity."

"Perhaps, seeing you seem to know all about it," interposed her aunt, "you'll tell me what men *do* marry for. I've lived a good deal longer than you, and I own it has always puzzled *me*."

"Love, of course," replied her niece, but there was no ring of conviction in her tones.

"Only sometimes."

"They certainly occasionally marry for other things. For money, I suppose, position, and such-like."

"You may set down the greater number of marriages to none of these things."

"To what then?" asked her niece, languidly. She felt they were wandering from the point at issue.

The Widow leant forward in her chair.

"The greater number of men marry," she said, "for the very good reason that *some one* marries them."

Her manner was solemn to *empressement*, but there was a gleam of wickedness in her small, fat-embedded eyes.

"Therefore?" queried the girl. She was all alert

now, her aunt had evidently more sense than she had given her credit for.

"Therefore," said the Widow, calmly slipping back into her former position and folding her fat hands, "therefore if a girl makes up her mind to marry a man——"

"The odds are in her favour."

"Don't be sporty, my dear, it's not the thing just now."

The Effective Girl took no notice of this last remark. She was apparently watching a stag-beetle on the lawn at her feet, which ill-chance had turned upon its back, and which after the manner of its kind in such circumstances was struggling helplessly in the hands of Fate.

"You infer," said the girl, after a moment's silence, "that any woman can marry any man."

"There are exceptions of course; still, as a general thing——"

"What if two girls make up their minds to marry the same man?"

The Widow was not to be caught out.

"Then the cleverest wins," she said.

"The cleverest wins," repeated the Effective Girl.

She settled the beetle's little question once and for all by crushing him under her high-heeled shoe. Then she drew her chair a little nearer to her aunt's.

"That's why I want your help," she next said.

The occasion was well suited for confidences, as the Widow and her niece had the Pen-y-gwyn grounds quite to themselves.

The "guests," as Ringlets loved to call them, were for once scattered.

The Parson and the Sandy Uncle had gone to Barmouth "to get their hair cut," they said. Some whose minds were still young enough to desire improvement were bent on "going over" Harlech Castle, whilst a small and select party had gone boating.

The Boy had suggested it, the Boy had arranged all details, had personally invited the others, and—crime of the first magnitude—had never even asked his some-time charmer.

The plan had not been mooted when the Effective Girl had slipped upstairs to change the black serge a cloudy morning had necessitated, for the dainty cream "confection" the brilliant afternoon had demanded.

From her bedroom window the angry and astonished girl had seen them start. The Brown-eyed Girl and a Bread-and-Butter Miss arm in arm, the Medical and the Boy himself, and last of all the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face and the Little Teacher. The last-named was smiling up at her companion, all unconscious of the jealous gaze which might almost have blistered the close-cut turf under her feet.

"Little cat," said the Effective Girl.

From the friendly Buttons, on whom, "just to keep her hand in," she always bestowed a smile, she learned the destination of the p

Going boating on this perfect afternoo

not asked. Truly her crown was departing from her, her sceptre had been given to another.

Even as she had crossed the lawn to where her aunt made a wide black silhouette against the golden green of the sunny grass beyond, a dark scheme had entered her mind. To carry this out successfully she needed her aunt's help.

"The cleverest wins," was the Widow's last recorded remark, and the Effective Girl had drawn her chair nearer.

"Of course he is only playing with her," she said, suggestively.

"Why of course?"

"Because he happens to have a wife already."

"What!" The black silhouette fairly shook with excitement. "You don't mean——"

The Effective Girl nodded.

"How did you find it out?"

The Widow was all excitement now. Life in this quiet corner did not after all lack relish.

"He as good as owned it in the wood the other day," said the Effective Girl, with a little sop to the abortive thing she called her conscience.

"But then, I don't see what you're driving at. If he is married already, you are only wasting time. Married! Why, it's really scandalous the way he's been going on."

Though the Widow's morals were as lax as her neighbours' as regards fiction, in real life they were perfectly orthodox.

"If what you say is true," she continued, "you'll

have to drop him, and the sooner we leave here the better. I'll not have *my* niece talked about with a married man."

She took a vigorous pull at the drink at her side, which had almost ceased to effervesce, and the yellow-back slipped unnoticed to the ground.

"As to that poor little thing," she resumed, with virtuous indignation, "any one can see with half an eye it is a case with her. She really ought to be warned."

"I was going to ask you to warn her."

The Widow looked at her niece rather suspiciously.

"It is something new for you to trouble about others," she said.

"The cleverest wins," came in mocking tones from behind the big black fan which was again softly, slowly, waving to and fro.

A light broke suddenly on the rubicund face below the Widow's snowy cap.

"Ha! ha!" she chuckled, "very good! I see your little game, miss, and a very clever little game it is too. Married, of course he is, just as long as it suits our convenience, no longer."

"I thought I could count on your help," said the Effective Girl, sweetly.

In response to which her aunt chortled so violently that she had to be patted on the back.

After a while she regained her composure, and the two heads were drawn close together in busy conference.

The matter was discussed in all its bearings, and finally it was determined to make use of a cat's-paw.

"It will be much better for you and I to have nothing to do with it," said the astute Effective Girl.

The Artist's Wife was finally selected for the task; as a married woman and the mother of an up-grown daughter a little friendly advice to the Little Teacher would come better from her than from any one else.

When all had been arranged,

"Supposing it comes to his ears?" suggested the older conspirator.

"It would be just like him to let it pass. Even though he denied it, no one could fix the rumour with any certainty on either of us, and my position would be no worse than before. I should just have to think of another plan."

"In any case the cleverest wins, eh?"

The Widow went off into another fit of chuckling.

"True for you."

The Effective Girl rose from her chair. She looked already elated with triumph, a bright spot of colour was on either cheek, her long cream draperies swept in stately lines from her willowy figure.

Something prompted her aunt to say:

"I am helping you in this because you ask me. Not that I don't think you might do better for yourself. You really are beautiful to-day."

"That is because I am in love," answered the Effective Girl, with down-dropped eyes.

"It seems so funny, coming from you," was her aunt's rejoinder.

For a moment her face was hidden as she stooped to recapture the neglected yellow-back.

The Effective Girl swept away among the tree-stems to find some changing bramble leaves for the bosom of her gown against the home-coming of the boating party.

"They will be hot and dishevelled with rowing," she told herself. "I will be walking in the shadow of the trees, cool and fresh, and fair to look upon."

CHAPTER XXXV

AN ADVENTURE

THERE is no doubt the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, for some reason known only to himself, felt he had, led away by the sunset hour, gone rather too far with the Little Teacher, and honestly meant to keep his resolution and draw back by degrees.

But when, the following morning, he met her bright eyes, eyes that looked fearlessly into his with their loving secret all too plainly revealed, he really hadn't the heart (it could not after all have been a wooden one) to dull their light; and the delicate rose that now overspread the pale cheeks was so much prettier than the painful flush that he had at one time loved to bring there, that he found it a very difficult matter to know just when and where to begin the drawing-back process.

Still, he could honestly say that it was not he who had arranged the little boating expedition. He had not even known when consenting to join the party that the Little Teacher was to be one of the number.

Once settled he could not well draw back, so

persuaded himself that it was only wisdom to take the good the gods gave and put off less pleasant matters to another day.

Truly it was a happy crew the little craft carried as it dropped down the river past the old stranded boat, submerged now all but a hand's-breadth of the green-stained bows, for the tide was high, but so still there was hardly a ripple in the sedges by the bank.

Calm though it was, there was some little difficulty in making the open sea, and had not the Medical and the Boy both pulled a strong oar, the little craft might easily have overturned; but once out of the river's mouth the sea was like a pond.

Suggested, doubtless, by the recent momentary danger, the subject of swimming came up. On comparing notes it was found that of the ladies only the Brown-eyed Girl could swim, the Bread-and-Butter Miss confessed she had always been afraid to learn, and the Little Teacher never had had a chance.

Of the men the Medical volunteered he was fairly "strong on the wing," the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face thought he could keep afloat, and the Boy owned he was no hand; "I was always a 'dry bob,' he explained, naively.

Far out on the still sea they went with no sound but the rhythmic thud, thud of the oars in the rowlocks. Part of the time the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face took both oars. Later he leant back in the stern at the Little Teacher's side, telling tales of far-off lands, whilst the Brown-eyed Girl and the

Medical took each an oar, and very well they pulled together!

A merry party it was! Too closely packed for much sentiment, unless a lingering of the hands in exchanging oars, or a tell-tale glance in one another's eyes could be counted such.

Presently some one asked for a song. Very soon, near and far, the soft sea air was filled with music. Deep and clear, treble and bass, true and strong, the melody rang out.

By-and-by the boat was turned homewards. Still singing they came to the mouth of the river. And whether their thoughts intent on song were not sufficiently on their oars; or whether no one had noticed that the tide was now running out swiftly; or whether, as was afterwards affirmed, the Bread-and-Butter Miss leant too far over in her efforts to secure a piece of passing seaweed, and the Boy, springing up to grasp her, overturned the boat; certain it is that in the twinkling of an eye the song had ceased, and the singers found themselves floundering in the water, with the boat, bottom-up, already floating away from them on the outgoing tide.

The Bread-and-Butter Miss gave one little cry which died away into a gurgle. And did not the Boy wish despairingly that he'd been a "wet bob" when he saw the Medical in a practised manner supporting the frightened girl, whilst he, poor boy, panting and puffing, found it all he could do to cover the few yards that separated himself from the shore.

The Brown-eyed-Girl and the Little Teacher, one by her own exertions, the other by the ready assistance of the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, were already there.

The last named having seen all the crew safely landed slipped off his coat, and quietly entering the water again struck out determinedly for the fast drifting boat.

The Little Teacher had not really felt frightened in the water, it was all over so quickly, so strong an arm had upheld her, so tender a voice had thrilled directions in her ears; but now her heart sank as she watched the man she loved going fast away from shore, all for the sake of a stupid boat.

She stood trembling with fear. Would he ever reach it?

"It is all right," said a kindly voice in her ear, "any one can see it is mere kid's work to that chap, I rather thought I could swim, but—by Jove!"

There was a world of honest admiration in the Medical's eyes.

"He's reached it," cried the Brown-eyed Girl.

"Good! He's righted her," came a few minutes later from the crestfallen Boy.

Then a cheer rose from the little stranded group as they saw the strong grey figure quietly taking its place in the boat as though nothing had happened.

"He has only one oar, though, worse luck," said the Medical.

"Lucky even one was left," laughed the Brown-eyed Girl.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face was evidently accustomed to shipwrecks, for with the one oar he managed to bring his water-logged craft about, and to beach her on the shore a bit beyond the mouth of the river.

The Boy, by spurting—no easy matter in clinging wet flannels—was in time to wade in waist-deep and help to pull the boat up, thus getting back a little of his shattered self-respect.

"You saved my life," said the Bread-and-Butter Miss, turning glowing eyes on the Medical.

A flush rose to his honest brow.

"Oh, hang it all," he said, "we were so near the shore that as a matter of fact there was no danger."

"We've had an adventure," said the Little Teacher, gaily. A tall figure was coming towards them with wet grey flannels shining in the sun.

Her heart was as light as a bird.

"Won't my sister be wild to think she has lost it?" said the Bread-and-Butter Miss to the Boy.

"It was no thanks to me that she hasn't lost you as well," said the Boy, dolefully.

"What sights we all look!" said the Brown-eyed Girl. "I suppose we shall have to foot it home."

"By good luck we landed on the right shore," said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, "or I would have had to play Charon, and I certainly would not have guaranteed to land you dry."

"Dry!" they all shouted, "dry!"

For the next few minutes there was no sound heard

but the swish! splash! splash! of water wrung out of wet garments and falling on the pebbles.

"Sea water never does any harm," said the Little Teacher, practically.

"Only how heavy to walk in!" sighed the Bread-and-Butter Miss.

"I'll run on to the station and see if I can find a trap to take you home," volunteered the Boy.

By good luck one of the few trains of the day was likely to arrive in the course of half an hour or so, and the nondescript traps of the locality were according to their wont in waiting. The Boy secured the very driver who had taken part in the Cwm Bychan adventure, and on the arrival of the now steaming but still cheerful voyagers, they were packed into his vehicle amid much laughter from themselves, and many exclamations of "Deed now!" and "Pity!" from the native onlookers.

As they were whirled away along the dusty road the Brown-eyed Girl declared they were as good as a water-cart. That may have been a slight exaggeration, but at any rate their arrival at Pen-y-gwyn caused considerable consternation. Ringlets promptly marched the ladies into the kitchen, and directed the men into Buttons' own special department "to save the carpets."

Meanwhile, the Effective Girl was still posing, "fresh, cool, and fair to see," in the neighbourhood of the field-path by which she was awaiting the arrival of the boating party "hot and dishevelled with rowing."

CHAPTER XXXVI

"THAT MAN HAS A WIFE"

"I ALWAYS distrusted him," said the Old-Young Lady, clasping her hands together. "From the first I suspected that grim face, that repellent manner, were assumed for some evil purpose."

"For my part I have hardly spoken to him," said the Whitey-Brown Person, diffidently. "I own I'm rather afraid of him; but he always strikes one as being a man—as one might say—without ties."

On the lawn of Pen-y-gwyn gathered round an afternoon tea-table were the Widow, the Artist's Wife, the Whitey-Brown Person, and the Old-Young Lady.

The last-named had gracefully slipped out of a rough mountain scramble, to which the bulk of the party was pledged, and now she was having her reward. She thrust her be-frizzed head close to the Widow's florid countenance.

"Do tell us some more," said she.

"I don't know that there is anything more to tell exactly," remarked the Widow, judicially. "I only asked casually whether any of you knew that a certain gentleman was married. It was surely an innocent question?"

She raised her cup and saucer in her left hand and, slightly tilting the cup with her right, she sipped cautiously. The tea was hot.

"Then you don't know that he is married after all?"

The Old-Young Lady was clearly disappointed of expected gossip, and fell back like a dog who sees some coveted morsel held tantalisingly near and then withdrawn from view.

The Widow placed her cup carefully on the tea-table, wiped her mouth as carefully with a black-bordered handkerchief, and flicked some crumbs from off her ample lap before replying solemnly:

"I have very good reason to suppose he is."

Then the Artist's Wife for the first time put in a gentle word.

"Even if he is married, there surely is no crime in that!"

"Not after the way in which he has gone on with that *poor* thing?"

"Meaning your niece?" inquired the Old-Young Lady, with a suspicion of vinegar in the tone.

"Certainly not," said the Widow, drawing herself up with dignity. "Admire her, of course, he must and does; but my niece knows better than to mix herself up with a married man. You all know whom I mean, when I refer to that *poor* thing; but in a matter of this sort"—with a hasty glance over her shoulder where one of her lappets rustled lightly in the breeze—"in a matter of this sort it is best to mention no names."

"I quite agree," put in the Artist's Wife; "but

to come back to the starting point, what makes you think he is married?"

"I don't only think it," returned the Widow, lowering her voice impressively, "I know it."

So assured was her own manner that she almost persuaded herself that she did.

"May we ask how?" jerked out the Whitey-Brown Person, whilst she humbly helped herself to the piece of cake with the burnt crust which the others had rejected.

"This is how," said the Widow. She was thoroughly enjoying the situation, an extra lie or two in the day's march sat but lightly on her easy conscience. "You know my room is above the porch? Well, these hot nights I leave my window open—latest craze you know, prevents consumption——"

Here her fat form shook with sudden laughter. "But to go on with my story. Last night as I was undressing some of the men were hanging about the porch smoking—*and* talking."

"What about?" shrilled the Old-Young Lady.

"Well," said the Widow, pursing up her mouth, "the conversation was hardly what I could repeat to—ahem—unmarried ladies; but from what was said I gathered as plain as could be that *that* man has a wife."

"Then where is she?" asked the Artist's Wife.

"Ah! that is more than I can tell you," with a knowing shake of the lappets. "Better ask him!"

"I for one shouldn't dare," sniggered the Old-Young Lady.

"The next question is—what's to be done?"

The Widow had apparently elected herself a sort of informal "chairwoman" of the meeting, and wanted things in order.

"There is no harm in his travelling without his wife, is there?" asked the Whitey-Brown Person, unexpectedly.

"Certainly not," allowed the chairwoman. "At the same time, he ought to have let us known he was married; at all events he had no right to entangle any one's affections, as I, for one, consider he has been doing."

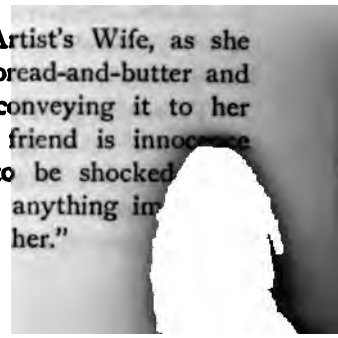
"Perhaps *she* has entangled his," suggested the Old-Young Lady, who was bitterly jealous of the Little Teacher, and would willingly have flirted with any man, married or unmarried, herself, had but the chance been offered her.

"I am certain *she* knows nothing," spoke up the Whitey-Brown Person, a dull tinge rising in her colourless cheeks. "I'm sure *she* is not to blame."

Loyalty makes even timid souls brave.

The Little Teacher had been uniformly kind to the Whitey-Brown Person.

"I quite agree," put in the Artist's Wife, as she carefully folded a piece of thin bread-and-butter and looked at it critically before conveying it to her mouth. "I believe our little friend is innocence itself, and would be the first to be shocked if she to find herself involved in anything im... I think some one ought to tell her."



Saying which she took a decided bite out of the bread-and-butter.

"Do you really?" rejoined the Widow, helping herself to sugar.

She was rejoicing at the easy way in which her victim was walking into the snare, but took care to betray nothing.

"Don't you think," she went on, hesitatingly, "such things are best left alone? I, for one, should not like to interfere."

"I wouldn't mind telling her," cried the Old-Young Lady, she was wondering already how the Little Teacher would "take it."

"Oh, don't tell her!" implored the Whitey-Brown Person. "She does seem so happy."

"Better for her to know now than later on," said the "chairwoman," sagely.

"*I* think she ought to know," said the Artist's Wife; but she said it sadly. She, womanlike, had watched with sympathy what had seemed a later-day love-story in their midst, and now, when all was going well, *this* had come. She sighed.

Then after a moment:

"I will break it to her," she said. She had noticed that the Old-Young Lady was the only one who had volunteered for the task—"and I can do it more tenderly," she thought.

"Well," said the Widow, "if you really feel it ought to be done, you certainly will be the best one to do it."

"Do you still think we had better leave it alone?"

The Artist's Wife had clearly no taste for the business.

Her plan so nearly accomplished, the Widow was not going to risk anything.

"Nay, nay," she said, "I am quite of your opinion. Then we may depend on you?"

And lest the other should change her mind, the Widow hastily finished her tea and moved away toward the house.

Later on when the Effective Girl was dressing for dinner, the door opened cautiously to admit her aunt, who closed it behind her with studied care, and then said with a face of great importance:

"I've done it."

"Done what?" asked her niece, raising her arched eyebrows.

"Set that little rumour afloat; she'll hear of it very soon, and I shan't be the one to tell her either."

"Oh, *that*!" said the Effective Girl, indifferently. "Yes, perhaps it is just as well. Anyhow, I wouldn't give much for *her* chances. He has been with *me* the whole afternoon."

She looked radiant.

Her aunt turned and retired without a word. The one lappet of her cap which happened to rest on her broad back had a crestfallen air, like the tail of a dog who has met with a rebuff.

CHAPTER XXXVII

"YOU ARE VERY BEAUTIFUL"

IT has well been said that happiness is like a tide, it reaches its highest point, for a short time only it lingers, and then it ebbs. The Little Teacher had had her hour, and each succeeding one seemed slowly but surely bearing away with it her happiness.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face had already repented of his weakness on the day of the upset boat, and now steadily, as far as might be, avoided any more solitary moments with the Little Teacher. For all the Effective Girl's triumph it was *his* doing, not *hers*, that she had enjoyed the Man's society during the whole of that mountain scramble.

She had, it is true, laid herself out to attract with all her might; all her witty speeches, all her flashing looks and arch sallies were pressed into the service.

"He has tired already of that quiet little thing," she thought—"all the better chance for me to show him how lively a girl can be." So she was arch and gay, pensive and humorous, all by turns.

Her companion joined in her light sallies and

capped her witticisms; but somewhere within that stiff frame was beating a heart not wholly of wood, and something behind that wooden brow was contrasting all this senseless chatter with the remarks, few, but to the point and of a delicate, unspoilt bloom, and the sympathetic presence of his little Will-o'-the-Wisp.

He sighed.

"What do you sigh for?" asked the Effective Girl.

"The unattainable," he replied.

The girl actually blushed. She could not do it very often, but she knew it was wonderfully effective.

It was lost on the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, or only served to remind him of a daintier slower flood he had loved to bring to other cheeks.

But his companion was speaking. Her voice was unusually low and soft. After all, as far as her self-worshipping nature would permit, she did love this man.

"What we think unattainable does not always prove so. Did I not once hear you say that we can always reach what we desire, providing we desire it sufficiently."

Her breath came fast. "I have given him a good opening," she thought.

He answered.

"Some of us desire too soon, and some too late, to only a few is it given to attain."

"And why should you not be one of the few?"

Her eyes burnt now like two green flames. The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face saw them not, or if he

did they had no power over him; for a little pool in a wayside stream had recalled to him other eyes as clear and as pure.

"Why should you not be one of the few?" asked the girl.

"Ah!" he replied, "when I was as young as you are, I entertained at times a Heavenly Guest, her name was Hope. When I grew older she came to visit me no more. Not long since I saw her once again, I sprang to meet her, to clasp her in my arms, but as I did so I found that she was dead."

The Effective Girl said nothing, her usual light laughter and ready words sank abashed before the unusual. And yet it was his difference from others that made her love this one man so passionately, although, perversely, she was all the time wishing he were more like other men. She longed for the moment when the last barrier should once and for all be removed, when she should be taken in those strong arms and that stern impassive mouth should melt upon hers in kisses; for no little bird whispered to her of what twilight woods had hidden.

Presently the Effective Girl again broke silence.

Commencing with some commonplace, she adroitly brought the conversation round to a subject never very far from her thoughts, namely, herself.

In answer to some remark of hers, "Are you all English?" asked the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face.

"I believe so. Why?"

"You are of an unusual type."

"Am I? What am I like?"

"Play Narcissus, and see."

The Effective Girl's scanty and ill-spent school-days had not resulted in even a bowing acquaintance with the classics; she had not the ghost of a notion who Narcissus might be, but at the Man's invitation she found herself gazing into a clear, dark pool in the mountain stream. Back from its depth a face laughed at her; the dark hair was haloed by a large white hat through which the sunlight gleamed; the eyes gleamed too beneath the arched brows; the scarlet lips were parted in a smile.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face gazed with her.

"What saith the brook?" queried he.

"Tell me," she said, looking up into his face with a laugh.

"You are very beautiful," said the Man.

During all the remainder of the walk the girl repeated his words to herself, and hugged them fiercely to her heart.

Very beautiful, very beautiful. That once acknowledged, the rest was easy.

Once only with a sudden, sick pang the thought just crossed her triumphant mind. "Supposing he really has a wife? Supposing he is only playing with both of us?" Untrustworthy herself, she was full of suspicion as regards others.

She dismissed the idea impatiently.

"What was that he said about Hope? I'll get him out to watch the sunset, and then I'll contrive to let him know that Hope yet lives."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

"I WANT HIS LOVE"

THE Little Teacher went unflaggingly through that long mountain scramble, and while she half-heartedly admired the varying vistas of crag, peak, foamy stream and heathery slope; while she duly answered all the little girlish confidences and commonplace utterances of the Bread-and-Butter Miss, unattached, she wondered why the world had so changed since yesterday.

Of course she could not expect "him" to give her all his time and attention, still, he had hardly spoken to her to-day. She was conscious, certainly, that her neat tailor-made had lost all its shape and most of its colour, the serge was of necessity a cheap one, since yesterday's immersion; but *he* was hardly likely to be influenced by that. Had she offended him in any way? she wondered.

"*Yes, the dried seaweed would be lovely for a fire-screen.*" This to the Bread-and-Butter Miss.

It seemed hardly possible. His good-night had been very tender——

"*You will have to be careful, such things are very fragile.*"

Only last night they had stood near the gate, all the sky had been full of stars——

"*The value of a thing like that so depends*——"

"Good-night, little Will-o'-the-Wisp," he had said.

"*You could hardly need more than that.*"

This morning he had given her a commonplace greeting, and had scarcely spoken to her since.

She thought of the kiss in the wood. Surely that meant more than friendship. If she could have him to herself for only half an hour.

"*Only half an hour*," she answered, mechanically, to the Bread-and-Butter Miss, who had asked her how long it would take to construct a fire-screen composed of double glass with pressed seaweed arranged between.

"Only half an hour?" the astonished girl repeated; "why, I should have said days and days. The seaweed is so fine it will take so long to prepare it properly."

"Yes, of course, I had forgotten that," said the Little Teacher, awaking guiltily to the knowledge that she had not been listening, and she entered heartily into the fire-screen discussion.

But all her heart was heavy.

The evening brought her no comfort. The sky had clouded over and a chilly wind blew. There was no sunset walk that night for any one.

The Effective Girl was out of temper. She played cards and lost and blamed her partner, the unlucky Boy.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face refused to sing. He was not in voice, to-night, he said.

This was a final blow to the Little Teacher; she had been buoying up her spirits with the comforting reflection that at least one joy would be hers, when with willing fingers flying over the keys she could follow his songs, love-songs sung to her as she had dared of late to imagine.

But he would not sing, and her light had gone out.

She shivered a little on her seat in the corner.

The Artist's Wife crossed over to her.

"I hope you have not taken cold," she said, kindly.

"No, I am only tired," said the Little Teacher. "I think I'll go to bed.

"Yes, do," said the other, with her gentle smile, "what with a shipwreck yesterday and mountaineering to-day some of you young people will be knocking yourselves up."

The Little Teacher felt her eyes fill with tears, but she smiled back bravely.

"I shall be all right in the morning," said she, as she slipped quietly out of the room.

"Has she heard anything, I wonder," thought the Artist's Wife, "or does he think he has been going too far, and is he trying to avoid her?"

She glanced across the room to where her husband sat at chess with the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face. The latter looked as hard and expressionless as usual, but to-night, for the first time, the Artist was the conqueror.

"You have beaten me badly," said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, "you must give me my revenge to-morrow."

He strolled away, and in spite of the inclement evening passed out into the night.

"There is something in the wind," whispered the Widow to the Artist's Wife; "has he guessed what we know, or what?"

But the Artist's Wife, with swiftly moving lips, was silently counting the stitches in the fine shawl she was knitting, and in answer to the question she only shook her head.

The Little Teacher had gone to her room, but not to bed. She sat down by the window and peered out. All was dark to-night, no moon, no stars. All was dark too in her heart.

"What have I done?" she questioned, wearily. "He loved me, I am almost certain of that, and now, I love him more than ever. There was a time when my own love was enough for me, but now I want his love."

With wide eyes she gazed out again into the night. And then a wonderful thing happened, for the dead blank without rolled away, and in its place were dusky tree-stems with a band of pinkish light where the sunset struck them, and in her ears was the sighing of the pines, and on her lips were *his*.

The Little Teacher grew faint at the thought of it.

The sunset wood, the mystic, haunted wood, melted away, black night had returned, the wind moaned up from the sea, and the little white face which

peered out into the darkness drew back wet with rain.

The Little Teacher lit a candle and stared at her reflection in the glass.

It was a wan little face that looked back, without any comeliness it seemed to her, tired, drawn, sad, and old. Yes, old!

"It has all been a mad dream," she said; "I thought I could get back my lost youth; I was old enough to have known better. The years that are past, though empty and wasted, can never be mine again. And yet," here the reflection gave back a wan little smile, "'Come what come may, I shall have had my day.'"

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE FRINGE OF THE STORM

THE Man-with-the-Wooden-Face had put on an overcoat and a deer-stalker, and despite the untempting nature of the night was walking up and down in the wet darkness. He wanted sorely to be alone.

He had to-day played the part he had set himself, and as a result he felt uncommonly small.

For all his unmoved face, he had seen the soft grey eyes follow him wistfully when he moved off with the Effective Girl, and he had hated himself for a cad. He had seen the weary look in the small, white face to-night, and had refused to sing with a mistaken idea that so he would save the Little Teacher pain. When she left the room it had become empty for him, and so he had gone out into the night.

Even there he had watched the dainty outline of a close-braided head against the flickering light of her chamber window, and his life felt empty and full of longing.

He began to review the past few weeks. There was Fate in the fact that he and she chanced to arrive together. She interested him from the very first, her half-timid, half-trusting air reminding him

irresistibly of a fledgling fluttering warm and helpless in the hand. He recalled how he speculated as to her age, her past; how friendship had grown up between them, and how her little past had in a moment, like a pricked balloon, descended from the mysterious and cloudy regions of air, and fallen on to the level plains of commonplace.

Yet his interest in her had in no way diminished.

He had pitied her, and then, all in a moment, in the dusky twilight had found that he loved her and had given her a pledge that he had no right to redeem.

He sighed as he thought of yesterday's placid row on the quiet waters, with its ending so nearly tragic and yet so wholly comic, like the shipwreck of so many a life.

To-day he had been stern with himself. Result—child-like eyes full of reproaching sorrow, and an empty hunger in his own heart.

He wanted her, that was the long and short of it. He wanted her now and always. She had become necessary to him.

And, vanity aside, did she not also need him?

"I've been a selfish brute in the past, God knows," he thought, "but I declare my love for her is the purest, best, most unselfish thing there has ever been about me. It isn't my own happiness I'm thinking of this time, it's hers. She has had so little, and I could give her so much. I would make her life as near perfect as an earthly life could be, I would shield her from every care; her every wish should be granted. Such little simple things she would

desire, and I could give her all, pleasures she has never even dreamed of; but I would keep her simple, too, I would not spoil my little Will-o'-the-Wisp.

"Perhaps after all the love I feel for her is something of a father's love. It is at any rate a pure love, and, curse it all, the hateful past must needs come between.

"With her I *could* live a good life; I would make up for the past, I swear I would!"

The night around grew blacker, the wind moaned mournfully through the trees, and the rain came down steadily. The Man heard its swift pattering on the summer foliage above his head, and now and again a great drop fell splashing from the boughs above.

He strode on unnoticing. His stern face was set. But with his inner eye he saw a fair vision of some far-off sunny land and a happy home brightened by the presence dearer to him than all else on earth; he saw straight-limbed sunburnt little lads, and a winning little lassie with clear grey eyes.

Far off the thunder rolled among the hills, bringing back a sudden consciousness of the wild wet night and the lonesome darkness.

"We are only on the fringe of the storm," he said, as again, faint, far-off, the thunder pealed, "perhaps it will pass over."

He turned to re-enter the house.

The ground floor was already in darkness, but upper windows showed here and there a light blurred with the down streaming rain.

Her window was lost in the surrounding night.

CHAPTER XL

"A PLAYTHING IN THE HANDS OF FATE"

THE next day broke clear and fair. The tempest of the night before had drawn away amongst the distant hills, with it too had fled the dreams of darkness. The sky was new washed with rain, the smile had returned to Nature's face.

The Little Teacher pushed wide her casement and drew in lingering breaths of earth's sweetness. Last night's doubts seemed unholy on so pure a morning; trouble had slunk away, not wholly out of sight, yet far enough to seem a dim, unlikely thing.

Life could not be hopeless on a day like this.

The Little Teacher donned her last and prettiest blouse, there were so few days left of her holiday now.

Beneath her eyes were blue rings, but in the eyes themselves hope was once more shining.

"I shall see him, at any rate," she told herself; "perhaps there was some mistake yesterday. It is strange he does not speak after that evening in the wood."

The Little Teacher's innocence was so unsullied that the meeting of those lips was to her almost a marriage vow.

She dressed and passed out into the morning. The river raging and roaring in its rocky bed seemed to call aloud for sympathy in its turbulence.

The Little Teacher answered to the call. She stood and gazed on the wild, swirling, foaming mass which had only yesterday been a purling, pellucid, stream. She liked it better in its present mood. It was grand and strong. Perhaps, by-and-by, when its passion had spent itself, it would forget its anger and sing again and be glad. Its present mood pleased the Little Teacher, she felt excited, her eyes shone.

The river's hoarse tumult drew some one else through the peace of the summer morning.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face had slept but little; restless and ill-at-ease, he had risen early and wandered out to find peace, if he could, in Mother Nature's bosom. Once outside, the river called, and he went.

He stood on the brink. Its bed filled to overflowing, the rushing flood swept by; the long grass and willow herbs and blossoming cow-parsley on its banks streamed horizontally in the flood; an ash-bough that overhung the water dipped and rose and dipped again, was half-submerged and again drew up, the water glittering on its feathery leaves and shining berries.

The Man stood watching it.

"A plaything in the hands of Fate," he muttered.

He then became aware that he was not alone.

On a rock just below him her light figure daintily poised, her soft brown hair uncovered, stood the

Little Teacher. The noise of the torrent filled her ears, and she was unconscious of his approach.

Suddenly she turned and saw him. She started, her foot slipped on the treacherous wet moss, and she would have fallen, had not in an instant a strong arm encircled her and drawn her into safety; whilst a voice close to her ear, and even then nearly drowned in the multitudinous cry of the river, said tenderly:

"I have you, little Will-o'-the-Wisp, but you nearly eluded me."

The Little Teacher tried gently to disengage herself from his grasp. But he held her firmly. At the touch of her slight warm frame all his good resolutions were forgotten.

"Don't struggle," he said, "little frightened bird, you are safe with me. Don't you know that I love you?"

The words were spoken. The eyes he fixed on her were burning. The Little Teacher closed hers for an instant, the roaring of the river sounded dim, far-off. Almost before she knew it her own voice was speaking, very clear and loud it seemed to herself, but to the eager Man it was so faint and low he could not catch the words.

He drew her closer. The next moment he suddenly put her away and sprang to a rock a foot or two from her side.

His quick ears had caught the sound of approaching voices, and soon the happy-faced Boy followed by the Sandy Uncle came crashing through the bushes.

"I say, isn't it prime?" said the Boy.

"Oh! good morning," to the Little Teacher, whom he suddenly perceived.

"I heard the rain in the night, you know, and I was quietly mugging myself. The water's been too beastly low all along for fishing. I should say it was first-rate now. Do you fish?"

No, the Little Teacher did not fish; but was eager, if somewhat incoherent, in her admiration of the grand spectacle before them.

"It has all come right, it has all come right," she was telling herself, almost dizzy with too sudden joy.

The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face now came from behind a half-drowned alder-bush, and exchanged greetings with the new-comers.

"I vote we organise a fishing expedition," shouted the Sandy Uncle.

The Little Teacher was rather surprised to hear the musical tones ring back.

"The very thing I was going to propose when I saw you."

He might have stayed with me to-day, thought the Little Teacher, her joy already dashed; "men are strange things, different from us. I don't think the people who write books know much about them."

By-and-by the four returned in a group to brea[k]fast. The men were talking 'Grey Duns' and '[S]Spinners' and casts and tackle.

Later on, after a tremendous amount of dis[cussion] among themselves, and, as it seemed to t[he]

fishers, a vast expenditure of time and trouble on trifles, they departed led by the Parson.

He had suddenly redeemed his character in male eyes by turning out a most enthusiastic sportsman. For a nasty little story had been set afloat of late that the Parson had no right to the clerical garb he was wearing, seeing the Church to which he pretended to belong had, it seemed, given him his dismissal. When taxed by some adventurous spirit with this fact, he had at first dissembled, but had finally owned that he had left the Church as he could not accept certain passages of the Scriptures.

"I know which bit it is," suggested the irreverent Boy afterwards; "when it says 'use a little wine,' he thinks it should read 'use a lot.'" Whereat there was a laugh.

The Parson had not been popular since. But to-day when fly-books were produced and casts wetted, and it was found that in all such matters compared with him the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face was but a toddling child and the Sandy Uncle an infant in arms, the mist that had enveloped his light cleared away, and he shone out like a jolly red sun once more.

The Query did not join the fishing-party. He said he couldn't see *why* any one wanted to fish. Beastly slow job, doncher-know? Why couldn't they catch them in nets, or pay chaps to get them?

So he escorted the ladies, who were anxious to see the Artro Falls in all their glory.

For once the Brown-eyed Girl was without a

mate; but she looked very happy with a small sketch-book under her arm.

The Effective Girl, of course, secured the Query. Though she had not witnessed that early morning river episode, something had put her out, and I am afraid the poor Query had a bad time of it, and possibly asked himself, *Why* women were invented, doncher-know?

On the point of departure the Widow whispered to the Artist's Wife:

"Now will be your opportunity. You really *must* warn the poor little thing."

CHAPTER XLI

"NO ONE WOULD BE SO FALSE"

"YOU looked sadly tired last night," said the Artist's Wife to the Little Teacher.

The Widow had clucked the others hen-fashion under her own wing, and then left the two together.

The plot was working out beautifully.

The Artist's Wife glanced critically at her companion.

Only last night the little thing had looked so wan and pale, so sad and depressed that it had seemed plain something was wrong. Now all was changed, her eyes were bright, a pretty colour showed in her cheeks, her step was brisk, her laugh rang out readily. Despite the strong morning sunshine she looked quite young.

"I am rested this morning," said she.

"You slept well then?"

The Little Teacher blushed.

"No," she answered, truthfully; "but I went for an early morning walk."

She laughed a little, happy laugh; she felt in her new-born joy a desire for sympathy. What if,

seeing she had no mother of her own, she told this gentle mother at her side a tiny, tiny part of her beautiful secret. Her cheeks burned at the thought.

"I think you are enjoying your holiday," next ventured her companion. She was not a shy woman, nor usually at a loss for words; but just now she was feeling that some things are truly difficult to clothe in speech.

"It is simply perfect," was the Little Teacher's answer. "If you only knew how I had looked forward to it, dreamt about it, counted the weeks and days till it should come, you would understand the force of my words when I tell you it has far and away exceeded all my expectations.

"I had no idea," she went on, enthusiastically, "there could be anything so beautiful as all this," she waved her hand comprehensively to mountains, river, and mossy-trunked trees.

"And the people?" questioned the Artist's Wife. "Perhaps I can lead up to it so," thought she.

The Little Teacher smiled.

"I wonder whether you will laugh at me when I tell you I was desperately afraid of the people beforehand?"

"But not when you met us?"

"No, you were all so kind from the first."

"All?"

"Yes, all!" said the Little Teacher. She could afford to be magnanimous to-day.

"You will have none but happy memories to take back to Town?"

The little eager face clouded over.

"Don't talk of going back," she pleaded, "my holiday is not quite over yet. Who knows?" she thought to herself. Maybe I need never go back at all."

"It is not nice leaving friends," said the Artist's Wife next.

The conversation was dragging somewhat from her point of view. This terrible thing she had to say was not within measurable distance of being introduced at present.

"It is something to have friends to leave," answered the other, quickly. "I came here without one, and now I have so many."

"Are you not thinking of acquaintances?" asked the Artist's Wife. Perhaps I can drag it in so, she thought.

"I daresay some are only acquaintances, but I do think some are more than that. There is your daughter, for instance, she was almost the first to speak to me when I was feeling very out of it all; she made me happy at once, and now she has promised to write, and hopes we shall meet in Town. That is, of course," rather shyly, "if you have no objection."

Of course the Artist's Wife had no objection, the Little Teacher had no right to suggest such a thing, she must count the whole family as friends.

"It is not a very big family now," she added, rather sadly.

"Your daughter is an only one?"

"The only one left. And"—with a tearful smile —"I suppose we shall not have her very long."

The Little Teacher coloured softly with sympathy.

"You think she is going to leave you?" she asked, in a trembling voice.

"I feel it coming," said the Artist's Wife, gently.

"I am so glad! no, I mean sorry. Sorry for you, but glad for her. Isn't it a beautiful thing, whilst they are both young, that they should be so happy? And he seems very nice," she added.

"Yes," agreed the mother. "And it turns out we know something of his family. When I saw how things were tending, I wrote to mutual friends; the answer was very satisfactory. Of course he is not qualified yet, but he has private means, fortunately."

"How beautifully it has all turned out," said the Little Teacher, with a happy sigh.

Then suddenly the Artist's Wife saw her opportunity.

She had almost given up hoping for a chance, and was resigning herself to let things drift; and now here was a way right before her.

She gathered up the reins of her courage, and catching her breath a little went straight forward.

"Things do not always turn out so well; one cannot be too careful with the people one meets at these boarding-houses," she said, with outward quiet but inward perturbation.

The Little Teacher said nothing. The Artist's wife went on.

"You see one seldom knows anything about them really."

"How?" said the Little Teacher.

She felt something of import was coming.

"Well—unfortunately they are not asked to furnish a true statement of themselves and their belongings on introduction, and it is sometimes—unfortunate."

"In what way?"

The Little Teacher's voice sounded hard and strained. She could see the other was wanting to tell her something.

"Well, they may be married, you know." The Artist's Wife was aware she was doing the thing badly, about as badly, in fact, as it could be done.

"Why would that matter?" said the Little Teacher, more because her companion paused for a reply, than that she had anything ready to say. Her heart was beating very quickly now.

"If they made love to some one else," suggested the older woman, thinking, "the murder is out at last."

But the Little Teacher would not see it.

"Surely no one would be so false," she said, gravely.

"Well they—*he*, say—might call it a flirtation and see no harm in it; but it might mean more to—*her*."

The Little Teacher was very white now. She stopped suddenly and faced her companion.

"Have you any reason for telling me this?" she asked, unexpectedly.

The Artist's Wife crimsoned.

At that moment she wished the Widow and all her suggestions at the bottom of the sea. She hated to give pain.

There was a moment of absolute silence. Then it was the Little Teacher who spoke.

"Do you mean me to understand that—that—*he* is married?"

The voice was terrible in its quiet intensity.

"I thought you ought to know," said the Artist's Wife, lamely.

She had meant to do it so sympathetically, but the matter had gone agley.

The Little Teacher grew ashen-grey.

"How do you know this?" she asked.

The Artist's Wife was cornered. She hardly cared to give the source of her information. Acting as she had done with an idea of kindness, she felt her action to be a mistaken one as she looked at the drawn rigid face of the woman beside her. Then she felt suddenly vexed with the Little Teacher, she was getting too old for love-making, and ought to have been more careful.

The Artist's Wife was sick of the whole business, so she spoke hastily.

"Some one overheard him talking of his wife. I daresay he had no intention of making it a secret after all."

She stopped to gather a bright red bramble-leaf, a thorn caught her finger. It took some time and all her attention, apparently, to remove it.

So she did not look up when the little Teacher said very slowly, as though her lips were stiff:

"I don't think I'll go any farther, if you don't mind."

The Artist's Wife murmured something incoherent to which there was no reply.

She listened to the slow, uncertain steps sounding fainter and fainter on the rough woodland path till they died away into the distance; then she drew on her glove and hastened after the others.

"Well?" said the Widow, in an eager aside.

"I think we were very foolish to meddle in the matter at all," said the Artist's Wife, wiping her hot face.

"Perhaps we were," asserted the Widow. Her eyes were fixed on two figures visible at a distant turn of the path. Their heads were hidden by the scarlet sunshade.

CHAPTER XLII

A MARRIED MAN

THE Little Teacher went back alone through the woodland.

It was a summer noontide, and in every open glade and upon each sunny bank the heat shimmered and danced ; but the Little Teacher shivered as she went. Her sun had gone out for ever.

She was groping her way in a cold dead world.

Only this morning—was it only this morning?—his arms had been around her. "Don't you know that I love you?" he had said. And she had known it—she felt now that she had known it—all along. For—she reckoned them up—for just *three* hours she had rejoiced with exceeding great joy, and now her joy was taken from her.

Where should she go, where she might suffer her sorrow alone?

She felt wounded to the death, hunted down, ashamed.

A married man! and he had kissed her! Her very lips felt scorched with the bloom of their virginity ruthlessly burnt up.

She had read of such things mildly recounted in the very modest literature she had always affected; the mere suggestion, as she remembered, had always made her feel guilty and uncomfortable.

And now this terrible thing had happened to her.

Where should she go?

With the impulse of a wounded animal that seeks its lair she hurried blindly forward, her feet slipping and stumbling as she went back along the path so gaily traversed in the earlier morning.

The river, never far from her, sounded fierce and threatening to her excited imagination. She fled from it dumbly, never stopping till she found her hand upon the Pen-y-gwyn gate; there she paused a moment to regain, if possible, her shattered composure before facing, it might be, inquiring eyes.

After all, long years of self-repression are not without their uses.

It was a very quiet and self-possessed Little Teacher that a few minutes later mounted the entrance steps. She was even able to smile slightly and murmur something about the heat as she passed Ringlets on the threshold.

That vivacious person was confabulating with the Maiden about household matters; the latter allowed her attention to wander for a moment, whilst she regarded the Little Teacher with a stony stare. She didn't approve of visitors "trapesing about between meals."

Her displeasure was lost on the quiet little person, with the sober white face, who passed on up the stairs.

"She looks real bad," said the Maiden, grimly.

"Only the heat, I expect," answered Ringlets, with a little flutter; "we have been so lucky this year, no illness amongst the guests so far."

"That don't say we are not going to have some yet," concluded the Maiden, with another grim glance up the now vacant stairs.

CHAPTER XLIII

WE DIE; AND SHE SMILES ON

THAT afternoon a merry brake-load left Pen-y-gwyn on bathing thoughts intent.

The Little Teacher excused herself, pleading the overpowering heat.

The Widow looked at the Artist's Wife, and the latter flushed guiltily.

The Effective Girl turned and stared hard at the Little Teacher. No compunction filled her at the sight of the heavy eyes and drooping figure.

"The cleverest wins," she whispered to her aunt.

"My dear, you are sometimes hateful," was the retort.

So they drove away leaving one little lonely figure on the lawn.

The fishermen had not yet returned; she was alone with her trouble.

The bright sunshine mocked her.

She followed with her ears the sound of the wheels crunching over the old stone bridge, then the clop, clop of the horses' hoofs on the hard road, growing ever fainter and fainter in the distance. These out of hearing, everything was very still.

A squirrel came across the lawn and sat up erect to gaze; but making nothing of the motionless figure, he hastily retired. The walnuts were ripening, and there was the winter to be thought of.

Next a robin, pert and bold, settled on the rustic table near her chair. The Little Teacher looked at him wistfully. Suddenly he broke into a clear, slender treble song.

Two large tears slowly filled the childlike eyes and splashed upon the open book upon her knee. The robin's song recalled the first happy morning of her holiday. She who had borne long years of loneliness and poverty as a simple matter of course was full of sorrow for her poor little self now.

The robin flew away.

His song ceased, the sound of the river reached the Little Teacher's ears, calling, calling.

She rose from the chair, laid aside her unread book, and with slow steps crossed the sun-warm turf, making for the very spot where she had that morning stood, whilst for her all things had become new. The river had already lost the first fulness of its flood; the grass and willow-herbs lay indeed drenched and stricken, but no longer under water; the ash-bough showed high above the stream, a ray of sunlight gilded its wet berries.

On the verge at the Little Teacher's feet amongst the waste and wreck of twigs, and cones, and green and tattered leaves lay something that had not been there this morning: a little handful of matted grey fur—a baby rabbit water-marred and dead.

The Little Teacher stooped and raised it in her hand. Her brimming tears fell fast upon it.

"Nature is not beautiful and kind," she said, "she is cruel and pitiless; we are nothing to her, we sin and we suffer and we die; and she—goes on smiling."

"Poor little bunny," she added, tenderly, "you were happy this morning—so was I. Now you are dead—and oh! how I envy you!"

She laid the rabbit on a mossy bank and turned to go back to the house. Her heart was very bitter, and the glory of pearly mountains, the beauty of sun-kissed trees and gold-splashed turf, daisy-starred, found in her just then no response. She almost hated what she had so much admired, in that it could smile on regardless while she suffered.

CHAPTER XLIV

"IS THERE NO WAY OUT?"

THEY met at dinner.

She feared at first to meet his eye; then furtively little by little her troubled gaze sought his.

He never looked her way.

Stern, hard-faced as ever, he was absorbed, apparently, in a fishing yarn of the Parson's which gave rise to a lively discussion concerning the alleged weight of a pike of ancient fame and the bait used for its undoing.

"He is not even thinking of me," the Little Teacher told herself.

The clatter of knives and forks, the babel of voices sounded to her empty and meaningless; she tried to rouse herself, to talk and laugh as usual, and was terribly afraid she had failed miserably.

She need not have troubled her head about the matter. Even the Artist's Wife, regretful about her morning's work, comforted herself with the reflection that "the poor little thing seemed quite gay again."

No one noticed any difference—unless, indeed, it were the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face.

Later on, under the starlight, the Little Teacher found herself alone with him.

This was certainly not of her planning.

When, after dinner, a general adjournment was made to the garden, unwishful to go with the rest, yet fearing to stay lest comment might be made, the Little Teacher had fastened herself to the Bread-and-Butter Miss (unattached) as one not likely to fail her.

For a few minutes the group had remained unbroken whilst the Sandy Uncle rolled forth some poetry about "the stars that silent run their course——"

"Wish he'd follow suit," whispered the Medical into the pink ear of the Brown-eyed Girl, as they slipped away from the throng.

Slowly and surely the rest of the party divided and subdivided until the group had vanished; though no doubt the silent stars watched certain couples side by side in the shadows of the greenwood.

The Little Teacher fluttered like a leaf caught in an autumn breeze; she made faint but desperate efforts to regain some of the others, but all had melted away. She was quite alone with the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face; a dewy night was all around.

He drew her hand through his arm.

She was helpless. His touch thrilled her.

"It is for the last time," she told herself.

The strong man bent his head and looked into her face. In the pale light she could see his eyes, they seemed to glow.

"Why have you avoided me, little Will-o'-the-Wisp?" he asked.

His voice was tenderly playful. It reassured her. She put on a brave front.

"Have I avoided you?"

"How seriously she asks what she knows already! Of course you have avoided me; it was only by dint of a great deal of diplomacy and much subtle pairing off of more or less unsuitable people that I have succeeded in securing you at last."

He laid his hand, warm and masterful, on the cold little fingers resting on his arm.

The Little Teacher tried to withdraw hers—in vain.

"Let go my arm," she said at last.

"And why?" queried the Man, still retaining his hold.

"Because you have no right to keep it."

The Little Teacher's eyes shot a reproachful look at him.

The Man dropped her arm at once; then squared round and faced her. All his playfulness had vanished.

"Why have you changed to me, little one?" His voice was low and pleading. "This morning by the river you were not so cruel."

The Little Teacher raised her face to his, the lingering light showed it pure and spiritual, and her eyes like stars. Beholding her thus the heart-hunger for her overpowered the Man. His face was in the shadow, so she could not see how his features relaxed as his great longing filled him; but when he took both her hands in his she did not withdraw them.

"You were not so cruel then," he repeated.

"No," said the Little Teacher, and there was a world of sadness in her voice, "because then I thought you loved me."

"And so I do," answered the Man. The words were few, but there was no need for more.

She knew it was wrong to listen to him, yet there was a mad sweetness in the moment.

The Man bent nearer.

"I love you, and I want you for my own," he said.

Then the Little Teacher suddenly drew away her hands, affrighted.

"How *dare* you make love to me!" she cried.

"Why not?" said the Man. The tone was perplexed.

"Because you have a wife already."

The Man stood for a moment like one petrified; then he laughed.

It was a genuine laugh, and reassured the Little Teacher.

"And where did you gather that story?" he asked next.

The Little Teacher trembled, a new delicious doubt began to warm her heart.

"Is it not true?" she asked, pantingly.

"Just as false as the person who invented it," said the Man; his anger was rising. "How, I say, did you get hold of it?"

"Some one told me who overheard you speak of your wife."

"Overheard—*me*—speak—of—my—*wife*." He

laughed again, but bitterly. "There's some devilry in this," he said. "Will you believe me when I tell you I have not, nor ever have had, a wife?"

The Little Teacher looked at him.

"I will believe all you tell me," said both eyes and voice.

"Then dare I make love to you, now?"

The Little Teacher held out her hands now of her own accord; but the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face folded his arms and stood looking at her as though he could not trust himself to touch her as yet.

"See here," he said at last, and his voice sounded thick and had lost all its melody, "I love you with as pure a love as ever man offered a woman. I believe I could make you happy, could crowd into the future all the joy those dreary, hateful years in the past have lacked. I think you are fond of me, my little Will-o'-the-Wisp." The voice broke on the name.

"Yes," said the Little Teacher, simply.

"My darling, my darling, I want you so," he went on. "Could you make a sacrifice for my sake?"

"Why yes," she answered, cheerfully. If he were free and loved her, nothing else could greatly matter.

"There are reasons why I cannot marry you." His voice trembled a little.

"Not marry me?" she said, wonderingly. "Well then, we must wait."

"Waiting would be no good."

"I don't think I understand."

"You said you would make a sacrifice for me.

Marriage is after all only a convention. Can't you come to me without, my darling?"

The Little Teacher shuddered.

"Not that, not that," she moaned, "don't ask me to do that!"

All those dreary years amid loneliness and poverty respectability had clad her as with a warm garment, at the thought of losing it she felt naked and a-cold.

"Can't you trust me?" he asked.

All the music had returned to his voice.

"I can trust *you*," she returned, "but not *myself*. If I did what—what you ask, I should never forgive myself. I should for ever reproach myself, and perhaps, after a time, you also."

"Don't decide yet," pleaded he. "I am well-off, I can give you a home of your own, you shall have servants to wait on you, horses, carriages, lovely dresses, pictures, flowers, we will read books together, we will travel. Do you know, almost the first day I saw you I thought how delightful it would be to take you to Paris, Rome, Venice? We will see the sunrise over mountains to which these hills are as sand-heaps. I will row you on lakes wide as seas, up rivers which flowery creepers arch for miles with a living bridge. Together we will visit the Pyramids; the Sphynx shall read for us her riddle of ages. And all the while I shall love you—oh! little Will-o'-the-Wisp, surely such love is worth something? And in return I only ask——"

"All that I have," said the Little Teacher.

The Man was silent.

The other couples had by now withdrawn into the house. The air all about them grew grey with the dusk, the river moaned in its rocky bed, a bat flew between them as they stood.

"Why cannot you marry me?" at last said the Little Teacher. Surely, she thought, there must be some way out.

"It is a long story," said the Man, slowly, "and a humiliating one. I never thought to have to tell it to anybody; but, yet, you have a right to ask.

"Long since, some twenty years ago, I had acted foolishly, more foolishly even, perhaps, than other fellows of my age and standing. I was in desperate straits, so desperate that a loaded revolver was like, without more ado, to have ended my story.

"Then came one and tempted me. He was my next of kin. The pattern good boy of the story book, 'never told a lie,' and all that sort of thing. I always hated him. He came to me, wormed from me my trouble, and asked me what it would cost to see me clear.

"I named the sum, to my despairing thoughts it sounded immense, unattainable. He took a cheque-book from his pocket and wrote a cheque for the amount. 'This,' he said, covering it with his hand, 'is yours on one condition.' He named it. To me, smarting under poverty and threatened disgrace, it did not seem so hard to accept.

"There is a title in our family, no matter what; an estate, no matter where. I stood next to inherit

both, coming before him. 'For myself, I do not care,' he said, 'but I have long set my mind on a son of mine reigning in the old place. Just sign this paper and the cheque is yours.'

"The paper he passed to me was very short—a simple promise that I would not marry, that was all. It seemed no hardship at that time. Recently I had been cruelly deceived, and was in consequence an ardent woman-hater; he knew it, and took advantage of the phase.

"Still I hesitated. He wrote another cheque, doubling the amount. 'This also is yours, if you will sign,' said he. That would settle sundry other things, clear me altogether, and leave ample for the wide travel which my soul desired.

"He tempted me—I had never hated him so much—and yet—I signed. Since then title and estate have become mine. I have never taken up the one, nor visited the other. Where would be the good since no boy of mine can inherit after me?

"His eldest son was killed in a polo match, but the second lad, a veritable repetition of his father, already, I know, looks forward hopefully to my demise.

"It was the work of a moment, and it has spoiled my life."

"Cannot you get him to release you?" The words dragged out slowly. The Little Teacher's heart was heavy for herself and him.

"Who? the father? He died within a twelve-month of the signing of the bond."

"It seems so hard," faltered the Little Teacher.

"The evil that men do lives after them," returned he, grimly.

"Is there no way out?" asked she.

"Only one."

"And that?"

"The way I proposed. Consider it now. It is only in man's sight there is any wrong; it is, after all, merely the waiving of a convention. We cannot legally marry because of my bond, but to all other intents and purposes we shall be married. Think how you are situated. You have no people to interfere or be shocked. We can settle down in England or elsewhere, where we are unknown, and no one will be any the wiser."

"We should be living a lie. No happiness could come of it."

"Paugh!" said the Man. "Think how little happiness comes of many a legalised union. Trust me, my darling," his voice softening, "we should be perfectly happy. You know so little of the world, cannot you trust to my judgment?"

"I know right from wrong," said she, staunchly.

"But think of yourself. In a few days, I cannot bear to think of it, you will go back to your life in that mean attic. It was just endurable before. What will it be now?"

"Do not tempt me!" cried the Little Teacher.

But he, manlike, pressed his advantage.

"Will you never, sitting, tired, cold, lonely, will you never regret all you have refused?"

"I shall know I have done right," said the Little Teacher.

"I am not so sure of that. After all, is it right to throw away my life as well as yours? Apart we should both be wretched, together we should be happy, and we might make others happy too. For your dear sake, for the sake of your own sad years, we would find out other dreary lives, and brighten them with the sunshine of ours. Would not that be doing right?"

"It would," said the Little Teacher—"but——"

"No 'buts,'" said the Man, taking one of her little cold hands in his; "I see our path leading on through sunny lands together, and everywhere we would shed gladness around us, but always *together*."

She drew a little nearer.

"It is so hard to know what *is* right," she said.

"At any rate we should wrong no one but ourselves," pleaded he.

It was a false note, and the next moment he knew it; for even in the dim light he could see the Little Teacher colour hotly as she drew her hand from his.

She hung her head and said nothing.

"You are thinking," said he, and his voice thrilled, the thought stirred his very soul, "you are thinking of those who might come after us. Believe me, there are ways of making even that right. Darling, don't you know that you are torturing me? Cannot you say—yes?"

"No, no, I cannot, I dare not."

"Love, they say, is so strong. If you love me, you will dare all for my sake."

"God knows I love you, yet I dare not do this thing."

He saw the convulsive movement of her shoulders.

"Don't cry, darling," he said, tenderly. "I cannot bear that. Don't decide to-night. I would not take unfair advantage. Now you know all, consider well, and give me your answer to-morrow. And if I know your true woman's heart, little Will-o'-the-Wisp, that answer will be 'Yes.'"

It was late when they returned to the house. The night was intensely hot, chairs had been brought into the hall, some of the guests were seated on the steps.

"We have been hunting glow-worms," said the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face, easily, as they sauntered up to the door.

No one said anything; but the Little Teacher thought the Artist's Wife looked at her coldly, and the Old-Young Lady openly drew away her skirt from contact with the soft grey one.

"It is the beginning of the end," thought the Little Teacher, drearily.

CHAPTER XLV

THE WAY OUT

THE Little Teacher went early to her room, but not to bed. She sat down by the open window, the night was so still her candle did not even flicker.

She tried to think, but her head was in a whirl. She pressed her hot brow to the cold glass.

"I *must* think, I *must* think," she told herself again and again.

"It must be decided to-night. God help me to the right."

But right and wrong seemed desperately, hopelessly muddled.

"Oh for a way out!" she sighed.

She tried to state the case fairly to herself. Long ago, far-off in her almost forgotten childhood, it seemed to her that some one had said, "When in doubt choose the hardest path."

The hardest path! There was no doubt which that was. To give up all, love, hope, "him," and return to that grim life in the dreary Town. Already in fancy its walls seemed to be narrowing, closing

around her. No, no, she could not bear it, anything rather than that.

The other path called to her, gay with all the brightness her life had so far lacked; filled with the love of which the bygone years had been so empty. She would make him so happy; she could see in fancy his set face soften, his keen eyes glow.

"The Man-with-the-Wooden-Face," she repeated the silly words tenderly; he would be that no longer, or only in play when they were together. "He said we should be always together. He is a good man, I am sure of it, and he said there would be no wrong, he spoke of all the good we might do."

Here she caught herself up and paused. That which had seemed impossible at first was already just possible. Oh, where were her thoughts leading her?

"Is there no way out?" she cried to the dark night and the cold, uncaring stars.

Then like an answer to the question came a haunting memory of words spoken all in jest, "There is always the quiet pool."

She put them from her hastily as beside the case.

"I must think, I must think!" she told herself. "I have only to-night to settle it, and a summer night is so short."

Settle it! who and what was she to settle it or anything?

'Twas a grim game played betwixt heart and mind, played, too, to the death. All her early religion taught at her mother's knee, the calm, clean

gospel of respectability drawn in with the very breath of later years, and something deeper, stronger still, which for want of a better name she called her conscience, all these on the one side—and on the other Love.

Love backed, as though he, himself, were not sufficiently alluring, by all worldly advantage, all the soft pleasant things of life she had lacked so long. Between the two her little self was tossed to and fro like a shuttlecock in the hands of the Fates.

"It is mine to decide," said the tired little brain.

"I have already decided," cried the throbbing little heart.

"A way out, a way out," like a caged thing, panted the Little Teacher.

Again there came with closer, stronger persistence the thought of the quiet pool. She let her mind dwell on it this time for just a moment. It seemed cool, and peaceful, and inviting to her heated fancy.

The rest of the household had by now retired to rest. All was quiet. Half-shrinking, half-glowing, the Little Teacher let her thoughts rest on the Man she loved.

Was he asleep? she wondered, or thinking of her? Was he, too, wretched and distraught?

No, she did not for a moment fancy it. He was calmly certain already, she felt sure, of her answer.

She grew almost afraid of him in spite of her love. He was so strong and she—so weak. She had resisted to-night; but could she resist again and again, when all the while her heart would be on his

side; her heart, her love, all that was strongest in her, arrayed against her own judgment.

He would not take "no" for an answer, she felt sure of that. Even though she gained a temporary victory, she could in imagination see him following her to Town. In the dreary midst of high forbidding walls, the prison-house of London, how could she resist him there? Would she be strong enough to put aside the hand that would turn the key of her prison and let out the captive into the blythe world of sunshine and of song? Would she be strong enough?

No, she knew too certainly she would not.

What then? Must she sin?

She never disguised from herself the fact that it would be sin.

One great overwhelming sin. Once get over that, and then a life of perfect happiness.

Dare she grasp it?

No, she felt she dare not.

"I am not strong enough to resist, I am not strong enough to sin. What is left for a poor, weak thing like me?"

Only the quiet pool.

She was so weary of the battle. She pressed her cold hands to her temples where the pulses throbbed like hammers; already the voice of the river sounded in her ears, and it seemed calling, calling. Was it wrong to take one's life, when the choice lay between that and sin?

One sin or another?

It all seemed terribly confusing, this question of right and wrong. Why did any one trouble about one or the other? Why not just go on taking things as they came?

Why? She could not tell why!

The hammers were beating faster, and the river sounded so loudly, she felt quite dizzy.

Was she going mad? she wondered.

At least the quiet pool would end it all.

On through the long night hours over and over again, without rest or pause, the endless warfare raged.

Sometimes, so weary was she, she almost made up her mind to yield. It was too hard for a little thing like her to resist, she would give in.

The next moment her other self would cry out she must not do it, it could not be.

And ever the thought of the river-pool came clearer and clearer before her eyes. It would be so still and dark, with perhaps a star or two shining, deep down in its cool depths. She was so weary, and that would be a sweet and dreamless sleep.

She fell at last on her knees. No prayer came to her despairing call, but her brain, it seemed, grew clearer.

"I know what is right," she said; "to yield would be wrong, and yet I am not strong enough for the right. I am quite sure that if I see him again," she gave one little sob, "I shall yield my will to his. There is only one way out."

She looked at her watch. It would soon be dawn. A summer night is very short.

She was quite calm now, as she moved quietly about the room making her preparations.

"No one must guess," she said, as she hung her evening dress in the wardrobe, and donned the neat tailor-made.

"They will think I went for an early walk," she thought, as she rumpled the bed, tossing her night attire carelessly across it.

Her mind was quite at peace now. She only wished the throbbing in her head would cease, it almost drowned the river's calling.

Quite suddenly, with one little warning flicker, the candle sank and expired.

"It is very easy so," said the Little Teacher.

The room was not quite dark, a pale luminous grey already showed where was the east.

"The dawn has come," she said.

Taking off her shoes that no sound might be heard, she silently left her room.

Like a ghost she stole down the long passage. She paused a moment at "his" door. All was silent within.

"He is asleep," she thought. Her eyes were dim as she pressed one long kiss on the senseless graining of the door.

"It is the only way, beloved," she murmured, and passed on.

The door-latch, despite her care, sounded hollowly through the house, the door itself creaked upon its hinges. The Little Teacher stood a moment listening, but the throbbing in her head and the roaring in her

ears together tumultuously filled all the silence. The world outside slept, calm, unheeding. One death, more or less, in the dim dawn was nothing to Mother Nature—so she slept on.

The Little Teacher sped unerringly though almost unconsciously to her self-appointed goal.

"The quiet pool!" she kept saying to herself.

She was sobbing as she ran.

The little night things scurried affrighted across her path; but she heeded them not.

"I dare not sin, I dare not," she panted as she went.

A bramble across the path caught her skirt. In her haste to free herself the serge was rent, the habit of years caused her a moment's regretful pause. Then: "What does it matter?" she said, with catching breath; "nothing matters now!"

The light came clearer, the trees began to take shape and substance around her, a far-off bird gave a solitary pipe.

"The dawn is very near," she cried.

On she went through the pine-woods, up the rocky river-side path, stumbling at times, picking herself up, wide eyes shining and the roaring louder and louder in her ears.

"My holiday," she sobbed, pitifully, "my first and only holiday. And this is the end."

Now she stood on the summit of the fern-hung cliff. In the dim morning light the fall showed white and misty like some pale spectre beckoning, the pool at its foot was hidden in merciful darkness.

Her goal attained, a sudden calm fell on the Little Teacher. The great question was settled. The way out was clear before her; the singing in her head had ceased; ceased, too, her pity for herself. It all seemed so easy now. Only a dull curiosity faintly stirred in her mind as to what would be beyond the swift plunge.

She had no dread of the quiet cool waters. Her purpose remained unchanged; indeed, the long night-struggle had exhausted all will power; but there was no hurry. "I will see the sun rise once more," she told herself; "when the new day begins, my day shall end."

She sat down on the mossy sward and let her thoughts drift dully. Her old home, long-forgotten, and petty events of her childhood, casual words spoken, chance faces seen and lost again, floated past her vaguely. Now and again she reminded herself of her purpose. Her resolution had in no way faltered, but, "There is plenty of time," she told herself.

The grey light grew less grey, a faint breeze stirred in the tree-tops, a single bird sounded a low, clear, flute-like note to the coming morn.

"The day will soon be here," said the Little Teacher. She felt mildly sorry for herself; but she shed no tears, the cruel night had claimed them all. Now she was only weary.

The light in the east grew stronger, the scent of flowers came floating through the tree-stems, the breeze awoke again and whispered of the brightening sky, the little night-things had ceased to rustle

among the grasses, another bird and yet another piped and trilled, rousing the woodland once more to life. The eastern sky quivered and slowly blushed at the approach of the bridegroom of day; the shadows of the night folded their dusky pinions and drifted away.

The new day was coming, was close at hand.

The Little Teacher knew it not; worn out with the long night's stress, like a tired child on the breast of Mother Earth she lay prone and slept.

The sun came up into the heavens, the long golden rays glanced among the tree-stems, the flowers unfolded one by one, an early bee buzzed past to his labours, Earth shook off her sleep, which is but a type of Death, and woke to a new day.

The Little Teacher woke too.

Woke at first to a sense of sheer content.

It was pleasant to lie there in the warm sunshine, it was pleasant to inhale the freshness of the morning air.

But, as the mists of sleep cleared away, dread recollection came, and, with a stifled cry, she sprang to her feet.

"The day is already here," she said, "the time has come."

Her trembling limbs scarce supporting her, she made her way to the brink of the cliff and looked down. The pool showed ominously dark now all else was bathed in sunshine.

The Little Teacher stood a moment gazing at it as one fascinated, and then turned away.

It was no use.

What had seemed easy, desirable even, in the darkness, had become impossible now.

In fancy she saw herself lying drowned there below, mutilated perhaps by those cruel rocks, a blot on the joy of the up-springing day.

She shuddered as she turned away, catching her breath with a little sob.

She had been mad, mad; but that short blessed sleep had saved her reason.

There on the place yet pressed by her sleeping form she fell on her knees in thankfulness that she was yet alive.

A sin on either hand, and how nearly she had been worsted in the fight.

"I asked for a way out," she told herself, humbly, "and all the while it was there straight before me."

It seemed quite possible now to take up the old dreary life again.

"My holiday is over," she told herself, "and I must never see *him* again."

CHAPTER XLVI

AN EMPTY PLACE

IT had been a strange day at Pen-y-gwyn.

At first, in the general cheerfulness of morning greetings round the breakfast-table, no one outwardly, at any rate, remarked the empty chair.

By-and-by Ringlets noticed one guest was missing, and despatched the austere Maiden to reconnoitre.

News was returned that the "lady" was not in her room; she must, as was often her custom, have gone for an early stroll, she would doubtless return soon.

Breakfast with its idle talk and cheerful clatter had passed, and still the Little Teacher did not come.

Ringlets, aggrieved at so great unpunctuality, gave orders that the table might be cleared; the late guest on returning should fare but ill, she determined.

An hour passed, and still no sign of the absent one.

A vague, unpleasant recollection of a small grief-wrought face of the night before caused the Artist's Wife to slip away upstairs to visit the Little Teacher's room.

The Widow was there before her.

"It is all right," she said, quite cheerfully, "the bed has been slept in, and she has gone out in her morning gown."

(Oh, clever Little Teacher, and they thought you so simple!)

"It is so unlike her to be late for a meal," she went on, "and it is now nearly eleven o'clock. Some accident may have happened, or possibly she has lost her way; we had better go back to the others and consult as to what is to be done."

So they consulted.

A vague anxiety was beginning to make itself felt like thunder in the air. Directly the subject was openly broached every one had some proposal to make or theory to propound.

Had she gone bathing? was a supposition fairly unlikely, but followed by an ominous silence, till a hurried search showed that her bathing-gear, at any rate, was not missing.

"She has most likely gone to collect some fern-roots," volunteered a Bread-and-Butter Miss. "I know she wanted to take some home."

"You don't think she can have slipped into the river?" suggested the Brown-eyed Girl, her pretty cheeks paling at the thought, "she is so fond of watching it in flood."

"It has run down," the Medical asserted hastily, "there could hardly be any danger now."

But the note of fear once struck suggested other possibilities.

"How about the railway line?" said the Artist's

Wife, "I always think this Welsh plan of using the lines as a footpath is a dangerous one."

"Oh, please don't suggest anything so horrible," this from the Old-Young Lady, "it makes me all of a tremble."

"I expect she has gone for a mountain walk and missed her way, and is very likely breakfasting on ham and eggs at some farmhouse at the present moment," said the Effective Girl, carelessly swinging her hat to and fro by the elastic as she spoke. "Just doing it on purpose to give us a fright and make herself important," she added, inwardly, judging another by her own standard.

"Don't you think some of us might go and look for her?" suggested the Boy.

"Organise a relief expedition," said the Sandy Uncle. But his would-be facetiousness fell flat. On the whole people were beginning to look grave, for the clock-hand moved on inexorably, and every moment the Little Teacher's absence became more and more inexplicable.

Anxious knots began to form to discuss the most likely places and the best means of searching, whilst all the while expectant glances were continually thrown to the doorway, through which at any moment might come, loaded doubtless with mountain spoil, the trim little figure with its bright little face.

For fully another hour they wondered and questioned, and could come to no decision.

Only the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face said nothing. Deep down in his heart lurked a terrible thought, on

which he dare not let his mind dwell; whilst continually there sounded in his ear a sobbing cry of, "Don't tempt me! Don't tempt me," then, in stauncher tones, "I know what is right," and lastly and continually with mournful refrain, "There is always the quiet pool."

He tried to hide the thought away in the darkness of his heart, yet *he* turned no expectant glance towards the open door. He told himself that never again would she cross that threshold.

So the day dragged on in an unsettled way, and it was afternoon before any news arrived.

It came then in a note delivered by hand to Mine Host, and containing no address.

It was from the Little Teacher herself, a very simple, commonplace little note, soberly stating she had been obliged to leave unexpectedly, and giving directions concerning the settlement of her account, and the forwarding of her belongings to her London address.

"Oh-h-h-h!" said Mine Host, when he had mastered the contents.

The news soon became public. The Little Teacher had gone.

People looked at one another at first in silence. Then came shrugging of shoulders and whispered words. Yet insignificant creature as she was, the Little Teacher had made a place for herself; and now that it was empty, one began to recall to another how cheerful she was, how unselfish; they remembered her little kindly words and ways; and they missed her.

"I am sorry I told her now," said the Artist's Wife.

"I said, if you remember, we had better leave it alone," retorted the Widow, helping herself to buttered toast.

"You'll have to let people know it was all a mistake," said her niece, when they were alone together later on.

"Why?" questioned her aunt.

"What has happened has not altered my plans," said the Effective Girl, obstinately.

"Then you will have to carry them out without my help, for I am sick of your schemes," asserted the Widow.

"I shall win yet," said the girl, doggedly.

CHAPTER XLVII

"I WILL NOT TEMPT YOU"

THE Man-with-the-Wooden-Face left the next day.

If the sudden departure of the Little Teacher had been a blow to him, he gave no sign. The same calm, the same coldness as always, characterised his demeanour. He certainly refused that night to sing, he had a trifle of a cold he said.

The Widow and the Artist's Wife exchanged furtive glances; and the pale eyes of the Whitey-Brown Person filled with tears. The Effective Girl proposed a dance; the Bread-and-Butter Misses were delighted, chairs and tables were cleared away, and the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face proved *the* dancer of the evening.

Floating round in his arms, the Effective Girl could hardly conceal her triumph.

"The cleverest wins," she kept repeating to herself.

But the Man-with-the-Wooden-Face left next morning.

Perhaps he deemed that away from the scene of

their meeting he would forget the Little Teacher. It was no good. Her presence went with him. "Strange," he said to himself, "how the little thing haunts me."

He had not yet recovered the awful hours of suspense, he alone knew of, whilst he had waited —waited—dreading the news that might come—expecting any minute to see a little form borne in limp and wet, and laid down amongst that chattering throng. At length, after a whole age of waiting, as it had seemed, her note had come; and the meaning of it all had smote his heart with bitterness.

"She is afraid of me! Poor little woman! I have driven her away! Was I then so cruel to her?"

Yet there was half comfort in the thought that she dare not see him again lest she should yield.

Would she yield?

The bare thought sent a hot glow to his dark restless eyes.

The next moment he told himself she would never yield, and he was glad of it; for, after all, once yielded would she ever be again the transparent, sinpure little soul who had filled his heart with an intensity of passion such as he had never before experienced?

"Dear little Will-o'-the-Wisp! I shall be all the better for knowing you! I will not tempt you, darling, but I must see you just once again." So he resolved.

Arrived in London, he waited, outwardly calm but inwardly in a fever of impatience, until the afternoon

of the next day before he drove to the address the Little Teacher had given in her note to Mine Host, and which had been easily obtained through the friendly Buttons.

As the cab turned down the dreary street with its uniform houses of shabby gentility his heart sank within him for the Little Teacher.

The cab stopped before a house which seemed, if possible, a little shabbier, a little drearier, a little greyer even, than its neighbours.

The Man had plenty of time to take in all the dingy details before the door was answered by a down-at-heel little slattern of a servant, who, after a short parley, informed him that he must "walk strite up, yer carn't miss it no-hows, on yer right and at the stair 'ed." So the Man went stumbling up several flights of ill-lit and creaking stairs until he found himself at the "stair 'ed," and on his right hand—a door.

He knocked.

No answer.

He knocked again.

"Come in," said a low voice.

And the Man's whole being thrilled at the sound of it.

He opened the door gently.

It was but a meagre little room in which he found himself; a pitiful little room, with only the barest necessaries of life, and not many even of those.

But it might have been the audience chamber of a queen to judge by the sudden humility that filled

the Man's heart when he saw the woman that he loved, the woman who had remained untempted by all the gifts of fortune he had desired to lavish on her, kneeling before the cold grate trying to coax into life a tiny new-lit fire.

A ray of afternoon sunlight that had managed to elude the chimney-pots and roof-tops and find its way in at the small window touched the bowed head tenderly, bringing out gleams of gold in the closely braided hair.

The Man recalled the sunset in the wood, and for the moment his purpose grew weak within him. He felt he could not leave *her* here.

It was only for a moment, then a look of infinite tenderness softened the wooden features, and the Man turned, and, gently closing the door, stumbled blindly down the narrow stairs and away.

"Sweet little woman!" he murmured below his breath, "dearest, best, purest of little women! I will not tempt you. Your life is a dreary one; but at least it is good—and to you women there is a mysterious comfort in that one word. As for me—to think that but for one hour's weakness I might have called you wife!"

The Little Teacher had turned at the sound of the closing door—had turned dark-ringed eyes and a tired white face, into which crept a slow, hot flush.

"Who was it?" she gasped.

Then she gave a little pitiful laugh at her momentary folly.

"It must have been fancy," she cried—"as if *he* would come here!"

The next moment she had thrown herself weeping on the floor.

"O good God, merciful God!" she cried, "let me die now, now; for I cannot live without him!"

The Little Teacher was not finding the path of virtue altogether one of roses.

CHAPTER XLVIII

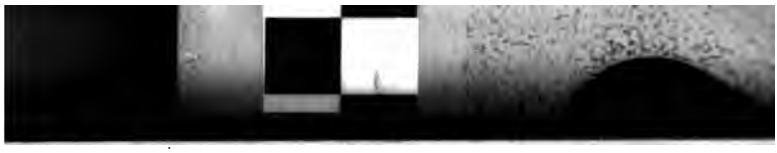
"IT IS NOT TOO LATE"

THE Man, too, was "dreeing his weird." After having come unscathed through that last powerful temptation, he ought at least to have possessed the calm mind which should accompany a conscience at peace; but it was not so. In all his years, and they had not been passed entirely in white innocence, never had he felt so dissatisfied with himself and his own conduct, never so anxious for change, so hard to please.

"I will put the sea between us," he had said, confidently. But the little dainty form, the sweet child-face, went with him. He plunged into the life of big cities.

"Amongst men and things," so he told her, "I will lose you, O haunting Will-o'-the-Wisp." But she was there—in a chance face amongst a crowd, in a pictured angel in a cathedral, in a glimpse half-caught in a passing carriage.

He found himself at last looking for her, watching for her at all hours of the day and night.



Then he laughed at himself, a laugh that was not good to hear, and sought distraction at the gaming-tables.

He was not by nature a gambler, but the excitement grew upon him, and he played madly, recklessly, till he woke one day to the fact that it was a long while since he had seen that wistful face, that it was a long while since he had even looked for it.

Then his mood changed, and he told himself that should he lose her image his life would be blank indeed.

So he went out alone, and tramped through great sombre forests and flowery meadows, down smiling, stream-fed valleys and up wild, gaunt mountain sides. And again his Will-o'-the-Wisp hovered near him, and taught him many things, and with soft caressing touches healed him of his wound.

Thus the months passed by, and summer had nearly come again when he was recalled to England by an urgent summons from his heir.

His heir! He had almost forgotten his existence.

He was dying, said the message, and greatly desired to see him.

The Man was at first half-inclined to disregard the summons.

"Let him die!" he said. "His life and death are all one to me."

On second thoughts, however, he resolved to go. After all, it was not this fellow's fault that he and his father between them had wrecked the Man's life. The poor beggar was dying, and who was he

to deny a fellow-creature the comfort of his presence, if comfort it might be?

And all the while faintly behind his resolution flitted the thought: "I shall be nearer *her*. I shall at least breathe the same dear old smoky London air she breathes."

So he went.

He found his relative gaunt and grey, aged by dread disease, propped up on pillows, with hungry, eager eyes blazing in his wasted face.

"So you have come?" he said.

A uniformed nurse flitted away from the bed head.

"Only just in time," she whispered to the stranger in passing.

The sick man caught the words.

"He was bound to be in time," he rejoined in a hollow voice. "I could not die till I had seen him. Leave us, nurse."

The Man took the wasted hand that lay on the coverlid and would have spoken; but the sick man silenced him.

"Hear me," he said, "for the time is short. You knew my father——"

"To my cost," answered the other.

"You know that he is dead——"

"I would give ten years of my life to have him alive now."

The sick man stared for a moment, and then went on, pantingly:

"Perhaps you do not know that he died a Catholic.

Before he died—he confessed himself to a priest—under his directions—in his handwriting—but signed—by my father—and—myself and my—brother as—witnesses—he left a paper—that paper—is for—you——" he paused for breath.

A dull red rose slowly in the Man's immovable face; but he said nothing, only drawing closer to the dying man that he might catch more distinctly every labouring word.

"That paper—my brother kept—during his life-time—since he died—I—I—have kept it—until now——" a contortion passed over the dying features, then words came again, but very faint and low. "Do you—know—why?" he gasped.

"No," said the Man. The one word was a whole accusation in itself.

"Because," faltered the dying man, "it—released—you—from—your—bond——"

"And you have kept it back all these years!"

The Man stood up straight and threatening above that other, who lay with pitiful gasping breath and feeble wandering fingers.

"Forgive—me," he gasped, "be—fore—I—meet—my Maker."

"Forgive you for a ruined life, a life dearer than my own—forgive you——"

Then suddenly on the other side of the bed there seemed to stand the Little Teacher, with clear, wistful eyes and trembling lips that murmured, "Forgive."

The angry flush paled out of the hard face as he bent over the dying man, in whose throat the death-

rattle was already sounding; he took one limp wet hand in his, and clear on the stillness fell his musical voice.

"Yes, I forgive you," he said, "as I hope to be forgiven. And more, if it will comfort you—can you hear me still?" He fancied the limp hand slightly returned his pressure, though the head had fallen back, and the eyes were already glazing.

"If it will comfort you, know that it is not too late. Not yet too late," he repeated.

A smile hovered for a moment over the stiffening features, to be swiftly blotted out as his kinsman lay dead.

The Man only waited to secure the precious paper, and to assure himself that it was duly witnessed, signed and sealed, before he took the first train for London.

CHAPTER XLIX

THE WOODEN FACE IS WOODEN NO MORE

THE winter had been a dreary one for the Little Teacher. As the months went on her face had grown whiter and more spirit-like.

Her employers remarked on her ill-health and suggested a holiday.

"I have had my holiday," remarked the Little Teacher, gravely.

Sometimes it seemed to her as though that holiday had been but a dream, and that she had never in reality laughed and clambered and been one with that merry band at Pen-y-gwyn. Then again, she felt as though the present life were the dream, and that she had left her body, as in truth she had her heart, amongst the far Welsh hills.

For the rest, the eternal five-finger exercises were a weariness of the flesh, but the Little Teacher was as conscientious as ever, and abated not one jot or one tittle of the care she took with even the most unpromising of her pupils.

But she seldom smiled now.

The days of guessing competitions, too, were over;

and she no longer read novels. "They are not true to life, they all end happily," she sighed.

Instead she tried to improve her mind with solid reading, from which her thoughts strayed and strayed again to the past year, to heathery mounds and winding lanes, to foaming river or twilight wood.

And her dearest treasure was a withered bunch of bog-myrtle which had come with her other little possessions from Pen-y-gwyn.

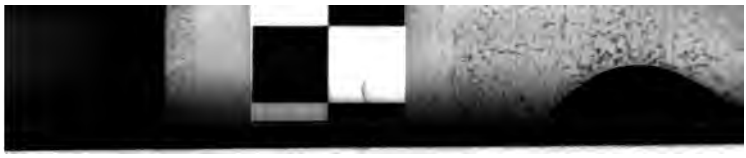
"I believe the Brown-Eyed Girl put it in," she told herself, softly.

She was often tempted to go and see that kind friend; but she remembered that last evening, and the averted face of the Artist's Wife, and she always refrained.

She was sitting one evening in the faded Liberty gown before her empty grate. It had been a close, oppressive day, and the little window stood wide open. The Little Teacher had not troubled to light a fire to make her tea; but had sipped the watery London milk and crumbled a piece of bread, and then considering she had fed, and being too utterly tired-out to attempt to grapple with the volume of "Macaulay's Essays" which lay upon the table, had taken her dear bog-myrtle between her thin fingers and had given herself over to dreams.

Of course she dreamt of *him*.

If he were to come now, she told herself, I think I could bear to see him, to touch his dear hands, to look into his dear eyes, and then to say "Good-bye." So she often dreamed in the evening, and the grey dusk



would fall and the greyer night follow, but never a lover's footfall on the stairs.

But to-night! What was that? Some one mounting the rickety stairs two at a time, a hasty knock at the door.

The Little Teacher had scarcely time to spring to her feet, before he himself stood in the doorway.

She turned ashy pale, her lips moved, but no words came, and she grasped at the table for support.

The Man stood for a moment in silence, his eager eyes taking in every detail of the slender form, the burnished hair, the long folds of faded brocade.

"My darling," he said at last.

She made no movement.

"Will-o'-the-Wisp."

Her whole figure trembled.

"My wife."

The words fell like the throb of a harp on the silence.

Then she put out her hands and came to meet him.

"Can you trust me now?" he whispered.

"I think I have always trusted you," was the answer.

He took her in his arms.

And the dreary attic melted away, and the months of their separation were not; for they were side by side in a dusky forest, and the red light gleamed on the tree-trunks, and the leaves whispered, and the birds sang of "love."

A little later the attic must have returned, for they

were certainly seated beside the empty grate and the bog-myrtle lay at their feet.

He had informed her of his kinsman's death and shown her the precious deed and explained all it meant to them both.

She seemed rather overwhelmed at first, and whispered the title he had told her of somewhat doubtfully.

"Shall I have to call you by it?" she asked, anxiously.

"Never, never!" said he, with a little joyous laugh. "You must call me always by the name you gave me first."

"But that is so silly," she answered. "Besides," she objected, as she laid her soft cheek against his, "it isn't wooden, at all, really."

THE END.

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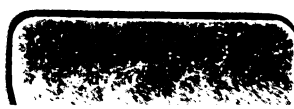
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